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## Transforming Images: Media, Sexuality and Everyday Life

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*Loyola University Chicago*

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

TRANSFORMING IMAGES:  
MEDIA, SEXUALITY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

MONICA LEIGH EDWARDS

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2009

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Transforming Images: An Introduction**

*When I find a glbt character (especially on a show I like) the first thing out of my mouth is a squeal of enthusiasm. I don't know if you watch Grey's Anatomy, but I was squealing last night (now I just have to hope they don't screw it up). I am usually delighted to find any glbt characters on TV because there are so few. I think what I am really looking for is a character that gives some representation of what it is like to be me. I am looking for some reflection on myself in these characters.*

“Squealing” and enthusiastic “delight” are within the range of emotions that we feel when we “see ourselves” on television. These words were spoken by one of my interview participants, a young woman whose coming out story can't be told without including her watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* while in High School. It became clear to me when hearing directly from media audiences that representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people is both personally and politically important. My study aims to learn more about the dynamic ways that everyday life is shaped by media texts; in particular, how queer sexuality—“as seen on TV”—is negotiated by queers and straights alike.

As a musician, and someone who has always been interested and involved with pop culture, I quickly became interested in the sociological literature on these subjects.

There is a growing literature documenting queer media visibility, paying attention to changing images, increasing numbers, and more complex characters and relationships. There are studies that explore the history of queer representation (Gross 1999), studies that challenge the quality of new representations such as “Will & Grace” (Raymond 2003), studies that illuminate the continued embedded heteronormativity of new queer representations (Chambers 2006, Ingraham 1999, Raymond 2003), and studies that argue that we are on a queer forefront of change (Roseneil 2000, Driver 2007). As I began reading this body of work, I noticed something quite quickly: writing focused on television was both textually driven and negative in its tone. More specifically, I began reading authors such as Larry Gross (1999) who argue that television representations of gays and lesbians are stereotypical and problematic in their impact on society. I interpreted this work as holding onto assumptions—and often this is left as an assumption rather than addressed directly—that the audience is a straight audience that will react to the text uniformly.

Reading this material made me reflect back on my own life experiences of television watching. As an adolescent in the MTV era of the 1990’s, I was always very upset that my parents resisted purchasing cable television; I was a junior in high school by the time we had cable in our house. I had been operating under the assumption, influenced by my naiveté in conversations about MTV videos and shows, that I was missing out on everything that was important in the world. I very clearly remember the first MTV show that I got hooked on once we finally got cable: *The Real World*. Media commentators often attribute *The Real World* to be one of the first reality television



shows (Cops competes for this title as well). The premise of the show was to have a group of strangers move into a house together, and to tape their experiences as roommates. The stranger status, along with a diversity of individuals and the shared living space was sure to create the kind of drama appropriate for television. I also know exactly *why* I got hooked on this show in particular: one of the housemates was a lesbian. I remember how I was introduced to her, as she was playing pool with a male housemate, wearing a t-shirt that read “I’m not gay my girlfriend is.” 15 years later and I still remember being so interested, and excited, to see this “character” on television. Along with k.d. lang, Melissa Etheridge, and The Indigo Girls, these women provided the backdrop for my introduction to the existence of lesbians in society, and facilitated my comfortable exit two years later from heterosexual identity.

Angela Ragusa (2005) states, referencing Joshua Gamson (1998), that “the media does more than merely reflect reality. It actively shapes culture, sponsors meaning and is a site where cultural norms are contested” (654). For these scholars, the media is part of a process of (popular) cultural production; it is an institution—shaped by political economic forces—where meaning is fluid and audiences engaged. How, then, do media audiences consume and use television shows, story lines, and characters? In my personal experience television is strongly incorporated into the organization of my (and others’) everyday life. When I spent a semester at home training a puppy, cleaning, and working on my dissertation, the television was almost always on in the background. I have a friend who jokingly calls me “Monica bang,” a reference from the television show *Friends*. I was talking to three women one evening after watching *The L Word* at a local lesbian bar, when one of the women began psychoanalyzing one of the character’s

infidelity, fully engaged in explaining the characters behavior, as if she were a real person, a friend. Clearly then, the media in general, and television in particular, are very important components in the structure of my every day world. Academic research supports this—both theoretically and empirically. Rom Lembo (2000) for example, explored “people’s use of television as a part of the routines of relaxation and enjoyment that constitute...every day lives...without losing sight of the sociological complexity of the routines themselves” (119).

Steven Seidman argues that we are moving to a historical moment “beyond the closet,” to a new era of gay and lesbian life marked by increased visibility and ease in everyday life (2002). He points to the increasing normalization of gays and lesbians in Hollywood films as support for his thesis, indicating what he and others, such as Sasha Roseneil (2000) believes is a critical component of recent positive changes in gay and lesbian life: media representations. As Roseneil writes,

...I would like to propose that the ideas and images of the sexual which permeate our every day world through popular culture are of considerable importance in framing the cultural imaginaries within which people lead their lives and construct their identities and relationships (Roseneil 2000:3.15).

And yet, there is still much that we do not understand. My work relies on active audience theories, and builds on queer and feminist theories and methodologies. I present here an exploration into how changing representations and increased visibility of queer sexuality are shaping people’s lives, both in their relationship within and outside of the media. As Steven Seidman (2002) argues, this increased visibility is clearly reflective of institutional change and greater societal acceptance of gay and lesbian people. My aim is

to explore how individuals are negotiating their everyday lives within this larger, institutional context.

New to the scene of television, and noticeably missing from academic work, are such groundbreaking shows as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, shows that center upon the lives of gay men, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women (respectively), and that move beyond the confines as critiqued in earlier research (Ingraham 1999, Raymond 2003) of the solitary “gay best friend” or other isolated and asexual character tropes. So then, how is this narrative change—in media representation—impacting people’s lives? Change dynamics are complex, and the micro and macro levels are mutually reinforcing. So much attention has been given to the macro level; this is why I argue my work here is important in its attention to micro level processes. As Fiske (2005) argues, contextual processes shape media interpretation and meaning construction, and as a consequence, I will explore not just how queer media representations impact people’s lives, but what contextual factors shape *why* our lives are affected by such media. For what reasons, and in what ways, do media audiences react to, interpret, and use, new and changing representations of queer sexuality? How do the media play a role in fueling social change, and in the queering of sexuality on the ground? How do queer media representations invade the realm of cultural discourse on queer sexuality—that is, how do representations exist; how are they created and re-created, maintained and reformulated—in individuals’ ideas of self and others, and through their interactions? These are the questions that instigated my research as presented here.

## Literature Review

In order to understand the direction of my research, it is of course necessary to explore where my argument enters the conversation. As a study on audience responses to representations of gays and lesbian in the media, this project is situated within two bodies of sociological knowledge and theory—sexualities and media studies. Here, I will treat them separately, while arguing their relevance to my research.

### *Social Construction of Sexuality*

Understanding the premise of my overall argument in this work—that changes in media representation are shifting the context with which individuals construct sexual identities, and interact across sexual identities—requires understanding sexualities as being socially constructed. Our society's (United States, and in some cases, Western) sexual discourse has, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, been dominated by a medical-scientific mindset that situates sexuality within the realm of the natural. The field of sexualities within sociology has worked, in part, to dismantle sexuality's roots in the natural, and to replant them in the realm of the social; to situate sexuality within a larger social context that understands the ways that sexualities are shaped by historical, cultural and structural processes, and organized within a power dynamic.

We have now arrived, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, to a place where in Sociology it is often taken-for-granted that sexuality is socially constructed. There is general agreement that, as Steven Epstein puts it, “sexual meanings, identities, and categories [are] intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products” (1996:145 qtd. In Gamson and Moon). Thus, gay, lesbian, and bisexual (the representational focus of my work)

sexuality has been shaped—but not wholly determined—in dynamic ways by larger social and historical factors. A significant component of the current historical and social context shaping GLBT life are the (post-1990's) increased media representations, from news coverage of gay marriage and Proposition 8, to *Will & Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The L Word*, and *Brokeback Mountain*. Just as the illegality of sodomy and the DSM classification of homosexuality shaped GLBT life up to the 1980's, these changing images are changing the macro-level backdrop of our everyday (sexual) lives.

At the intersection of media and sexuality, some scholars have argued that market trends have created the space for these images, making clear the impact that consumerism and commodification have had on gay visibility (Sears 2005). According to Ragusa (2005), “the media gave gays increased ‘positive attention’ (Sack 1994) and stereotyped them affluent” (656). Sears and Ragusa argue that as part of this process advertisers began to tap into the gay market—and this was in fact a focus on gay men, given gender inequality and assumptions of gay men's greater disposable incomes—and greater public visibility followed (2005). At the same time that scholarly attention has focused on increased gay visibility, others were writing about “the respectable same-sex couple” (Richardson 2004). Richardson argues (also seen in Butler and Seidman, see below) there is greater acceptance for “normal” gays and lesbians. The definition of “normal” follows heteronormative standards of monogamous couple-dom; standards such as monogamy, fidelity, long-term marriage, children, and middle-class living (Butler 2002, Richardson 2004, Seidman 2007). These various dynamics shape the circumstances and thus experiences of individuals' sexuality within a given historical moment. Currently, we are in a social moment with greater visibility—both in media and in every day life—

of queer individuals. It is my hope to explore the relationship between these two arenas of visibility (media and every day life), to explore the dynamic interplay between the two.

### *The Hetero/Homo Binary*

According to Stuart Hall, conversations about media representations are conversations about power. Consequently, I find it important to contextualize the power structure that shapes conversations about GLBT sexuality as both pertinent to media representations and people's everyday lives. According to Mary McIntosh (1998), the "homosexual role," and the stigma of homosexuality serves a social purpose; stigmatizing homosexuality facilitates the normalizing of heterosexuality. More recently, particularly through the work of queer theorists, this has come to be known as the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Understanding how scholars argue this binary operates is a critical backdrop for making sense of how my interview participants are disrupting this power dynamic. This "queer" addition to the conversation is important as it marks a strain of thought (often attributed to Michel Foucault (1990)), that situates power dynamics at the center of analyses. Continuing to rely on social constructionism, attention to heterosexuality in comparison to homosexuality has illuminated the ways that the two categories are connected to a system of sexual-social power that is heterogendered and reflective of patterned relations of ruling (Ingraham—quoting Smith—1994), and integrated within particular social structures. The power rests on this opposition. How my participants are disrupting this binary is discussed in Chapters 3-5.

*Sexual Identities*

Both research (of the past) and popular cultural discourse has attempted to mark individuals with sexual orientations, truths or selves. For example, if we are in the closet, we are lying about our “true” sexuality. If we are married, but going to public bathrooms (see Laud Humphreys 1998) for anonymous sex with other men then we are hiding our “true” sexuality. Ken Plummer questions the extent to which our stories reflect a “truth” about our sexuality; rather, they are told within a particular context that is ever changing. These are stories of the current moment and context, not necessarily reflective of a permanent, stable truth. As Plummer states,

all this is about the flow of power. Here are hierarchy and patterns of domination which facilitate the ability to tell the story of ‘being gay’: both personal power that allows stories to be told or withheld; and social power which creates spaces or closes down spaces for stories to be voiced. Here, then, is a flow of negotiations and shifting outcomes, enabling gay life stories to be told at one moment and not another” (Plummer, 1995:27).

Plummer argues that shifting power results in the opening of space for new stories to be told. This is evidenced in my work, and discussed primarily in Chapter 3. A sexual “truth” implies fact, stability, and in an ever changing context our sexual stories fall short of such consistency. Sexual identities—the public telling of them, the discovering the “truth” of them, the (re)construction of them—have become an important part of this conversation; the field of the sociology of sexualities, in the 1990’s in particular, shifted attention towards individuals and how they negotiated their lives and sexual identities. The changing media landscape is creating a context for new spaces to construct identities.

Identity scholars have looked at how we make sense of our personal histories, and how those histories are written in such a way so as to solidify our connections to an

identity. Amber Ault (1994), in her work on bisexual women, argues that claiming an identity is both a self-process, and a process of gaining access to a community, an issue I will discuss further in Chapters 4-5. There has been considerable sociological attention, notably by Arlene Stein, paid to this (re)writing of past sexual experiences as shaping and/or creating our current sexual selves. We use our current knowledge and sets of meaning to make sense of the past. This kind of meaning making also relies on static notions of identity, of sexual “truths,” whereby it is assumed that our sexuality remains the same across time; that our earlier relationships and sexual feelings must coincide with our current identification in order to make sense, to be “right.”

This is further supported by Stein’s data (while also referencing Ponce, 1978) who states that, “for a woman trying to authenticate her lesbianism to herself and to others, early homo-social or homosexual events, relationships, and personal feelings that may not have seemed particularly sexual or even significant at the time of their occurrence were recast to reveal a continuous lesbian history” (1999:84). Individuals engage in complex processes of meaning making, engaging in work that serves to solidify our belongingness into a category. Simon and Gagnon (2005) outline this process of “selective memory” as the way we use the past to construct and interpret the present (and vice versa). Arlene Stein (1999) provides an example of this when quoting an interview respondent who says that:

I’ve gotten the feeling from fringe feminists and older lesbians that if you didn’t grow up as a tomboy and fall in love with your high school classmates, you ain’t no fer-real dyke... When asked how I came out I have gotten into adding a fictitious struggle with lesbianism from way back in talking with some women. It helps to show your scars, even fake ones (84).



I find Stein's (1999) work here to be important and useful, in that it provides ample support for fluid identities and complicates the process of establishing sexual identities. Being a "lesbian," according to the voices of the women in her studies, does not mean the same thing for all women who are (sexually) intimate with other women; nor does the identity label *feel* the same for different individuals. Adrienne Rich (1980) calls this the "lesbian continuum," where lesbianism is not confined to sexual relations between women, rather it is contextualized across history and within women's lives.

Stein outlines the social processes involved in "becoming" a lesbian and elucidates the complexity and complications, of sexual identity categories. For example, she states that "unlike those who experienced themselves as more internally driven toward homosexuality, some women initially experienced a lack of congruence between their 'deep' sense of self (or personal identity) and the social category lesbian; they 'tried on' a lesbian identity and decided it didn't quite 'fit.'...Homosexual behavior did not itself guarantee the development of a lesbian identity" (81). For example, one woman stated that after having sex with a woman, her sexual partner felt an immediate connection to a lesbian identity, and a sense of permanence, but "to me, it was much more, OK, I tried this, but it was much more along the lines of sexual experimentation... Maybe I'll do it again, maybe I won't (81).

Further, some women identified as "lesbian" in more political ways. Stein addressed this in the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970's (and into the 80's, when Stein did most of her interviews for this study), making a clear connection between identities and historical contexts. Identity construction is a process whereby "individuals reflexively effect change in the meanings of particular identities" (Stein, 82).

Maintaining an identity involves work; individuals are constantly involved in interactional processes that work to continually maintain connections to identities. As with West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender" (1987), it is also necessary to "do sexuality" to maintain certain sexual identities. This will be discussed in further detail elsewhere in this paper.

### *Queer Theory*

My observations of media audiences allowed me to see that queer theory is useful for making sense of the ways that individuals are constructing identities and building communities in ways that are rebellious of existing power structures. There has been an emerging conversation within the discipline of Sociology about what it means to engage in a queer sociological project. Queer theory, often connected to the humanities, and to post-structuralism and Michael Foucault (1990), was incorporated into the sociological imagination by such writers as Joshua Gamson and Dawn Moon (2004), Steven Seidman (2007), Ken Plummer (2003) and Steven Epstein (1994). Ken Plummer (2003) argues that queer theory isn't connected to people's everyday lived experiences. My argument is that a queer lens can be used to make sense of social changes while still validating people's everyday lives. Understanding queer theory (and queer theory's historical roots outside of sociology) is important for making sense of my reliance on a queer methodological lens.

For those who profess a form of sexual identity that is, at some point, at odds with their sexual practice or sexual desire, the idea of a single, permanent, or even stable sexual identity is confining and inaccurate (Takagi, 1996:245).

Many of my interview participants agreed with Takagi's quote above.

Sociologists of sexualities first entered the realm of the sexual largely by exploring “non-normative” sexualities, primarily prostitution and homosexuality. While this research was sympathetic to the difficulties experienced by homosexuals, there was nonetheless a belief in a concrete “homosexual” subject. Upon the entrance of feminism in general, and intersectionality theory's critique of feminism, heterosexuality entered the realm of sociological studies. Here scholars such as Adrienne Rich (1980) and Catherine MacKinnon (2005) are credited for bringing heterosexuality into the academic hot seat. Subsequently heterosexuality and homosexuality began to be understood as relational social constructs embedded with power, and embedded within society; not just qualities of individuals. Their stance towards heterosexuality was always critical. My data on heterosexual identities, and interacting across sexual difference, add to this conversation in ways that distinguish between heterosexuality as an institution, and heterosexual identities.

Steven Seidman states that, “I take as central to queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a homosexual subject or identity. I interpret queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very ethos of Western homosexual politics” (1996:440). Seidman continues that, “queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself—that is, the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of sexual selves” (1996:441). Rather, queer theorists argue that these categories exist only because

power structures and knowledge production has created them. Plummer (2003) is concerned that this stance makes invisible people's reliance on these same identities. Queering sexuality, then, means that we must think about sexuality on different terms; our bodies and desires are situated within systems of power and meaning, and the project of queer sociology, then, is to deconstruct these systems so as to understand how discourses shape our sexualities, without losing sight of human agency. I find this process to be important, and use these ideas as a methodological lens to interpret my data (see Chapter 2). I also illustrate in my data chapters that individuals can both occupy identities within this binary, and still think and act in "queer" ways; that is, ways that are disruptive of assumptions of heterosexuality, opposing heter/homosexuality, and power.

For these few scholars, to queer sociology is to challenge, to deconstruct, and to expand the reach of sexuality. According to Sasha Roseneil, a "queer sociological perspective would bring queer theory's interrogation of identity categories into dialogue with a sociological concern to theorize and historicize social change in the realm of sexuality" (2000, 2.3). To interrogate identity categories means to illuminate their instability, as Michael Messner does through his story where his "failure as an athlete—might trigger a momentary sexual panic that can lay bare the constructedness, indeed, the instability of the heterosexual/masculine identity" (2007:265). This instability is shown through Messner's need to engage in work to maintain a heterosexual, masculine identity; that it is not permanent, stable, or natural. Thus, queer sociology is, as Sally Hines argues, a perspective that illuminates the ways that power embedded in sexuality is produced and challenged at the macro level, all while recognizing the material, subjectivities realities of the micro level (2006).

Mimi Schippers (2004) work builds this bridge between queer theory and sociology, between macro level and micro level. She analyzes the alternative hard rock scene, and uses qualitative methods to illustrate the ways in which men and women in this scene queer sexuality through their face to face interactions with each other.

Schippers thus argues that,

to queer sexuality is to in some way step out of, blur, or challenge hierarchical, sexual identities that define individuals as homosexual or heterosexual. Sexuality can be queered through sexual practice and discourse about desire, identities, or sexual practices. I want to suggest that sexuality can also be queered through sexual maneuvering or by manipulating the meaning and performance of desire within any given interaction (131).

So, for example, the straight women in her study would challenge the heteronormative assumption that they were sexually available to men by disrupting men's attempts to flirt with them and by engaging in sexualized kissing and dancing with each other. An important element of Schippers work is the ways it illuminates that to be queer does not equal homosexual—that individuals who identify as heterosexual can participate in a queer project, by destabilizing heteronormative assumptions of women's availability to men.

Sasha Roseneil argues that “we are currently witnessing a significant destabilization of the hetero/homosexual binary. The hierarchical relationship between the two sides of the binary, and its mapping onto an inside/out opposition is undergoing intense challenge, and the normativity and naturalness of both heterosexuality and heterorelativity have come into question” (2000, 3.8). She illuminates many images emerging from popular culture that are supportive of these changes, whereby

heterosexuality is no longer valorized in the ways that, for example, Chrys Ingraham (1999) argues. Rather, we are seeing images, such as *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, *Big Love*, and others, whereby historical constructs of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are no longer useful categories for the interpretation of sexual imagery. When popular culture, public spaces, and families become “queered,” queer scholars see this as “a way of thinking and an attitude of openness and fluidity” (Roseneil, 3.16). However, she does not provide empirical data to support her claims.

According to the authors I have discussed, one of the goals of queer theory is to challenge the very notion of a stable identity, be it sex, gender or sexuality; rather, gender and sexuality are understood as fluid, changing, historical and contextual. Considering that the discourse we use to describe our experiences is connected to the “relations of ruling” (Smith referenced in DeVault 1999), it may be difficult to find and/or uncover a more queer world. At the same time, with the emergence of a changing discourse on sexuality in the media (for example, one character on *The L Word*—Shane—has said repeatedly that “sexuality is fluid”), and given the media’s impact in the social world, I speculate that the media—from television to the internet—might have an impact in affecting a queer transition. For this reason I found it important to engage with my participants in ways that allowed us to move beyond discourse analysis. I argue this was crucial to my ability to explore how people both talk about, and live, their lives.

### *The Social Construction of Reality*

My argument regarding the sociological relevance of queer theory for audience research connects to understanding the role the media plays in constructing reality. In my

interpretation of my data, I argue that individuals are using media as a resource in constructing their everyday lives in “queer” ways (see Chapters 3-5). However, much existing scholarship on the media is structurally focused, silencing the everyday work of individuals. For example, Theodor Adorno argued, through the culture industry’s drive towards profits rather than product, consciousness was replaced by conformity, and unique art was replaced with mass-produced sameness (1991). As Adorno was writing, the culture industry was a relatively new phenomenon, and critical thinkers such as Adorno were very weary of the industry. While much of the logic of this critical theory remains in current political economic approaches to media—theories that argue that due to structural changes such as concentration of ownership, the media is again being reduced to sameness, and audiences and democracies at risk as a result—the work of Adorno and the critical school—is strongly criticized for its argument of a passive audience.

The work of the British school of cultural studies, driven by the directorship and theorizing of Stuart Hall, emerged to challenge the passivity embedded in the work of the critical theorists. New theories, still grounded in Marxist logic, emerged that included active and historical meaning making processes. As Stuart Hall writes,

The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate. What matters is not the intrinsic of historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations (2005:69).

Thus, all works emerging from popular culture must be analyzed within context, understood as part of a hegemonic power struggle; as process rather than object. Willis (2005) adds to this by writing that,

we are interested to explore how far ‘meanings’ and ‘effects’ can change quite decisively according to the social contexts of ‘consumption’... We want to explore how far grounded aesthetics are part, not of things, but of processes involving consumption, processes which make consumption pleasurable and vital (243).

The context of our everyday lives, the larger social and cultural dynamics within which our everyday life is situated, and the power embedded within institutions and interactions, shapes our relationships with cultural products (Jenkins 2006, Lembo 2000). Thus, my experiences watching *The Real World* and listening to the *Indigo Girls* are specific to the context of my life during high school.

### *Media Audiences*

If many scholars, including myself, are critical of structural models such as Theodor Adorno’s (1991) “culture industry” perspective and Herman and Chomsky’s (1993) “propaganda model,” then what do we learn when we focus on the active audience? Croteau and Hoynes (2003) write that

Proponents of the active audience theory argue that media cannot tell people what to think or how to behave in any direct way...because people are not nearly as stupid, gullible, or easy to dominate as the media indoctrination perspective would have us believe (Croteau and Hoynes 266).

Media audiences can and do think about and process, in various ways, and within contextualized boundaries, the texts and images they consume. This becomes clear upon exploration of studies that focus on ways that audiences make sense of and use the media that they consume on a day to day basis. Race, class, gender and sexuality become key



components of the meaning making process; how power dynamics around race, class gender and sexuality drive experiences, reactions, and uses of media products.

Henry Jenkins (2005) writes that media audiences can use their consumption practices—can transform their role from consumers to producers—as a way to directly challenge the structures that oppress them. For Jenkins,

Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture (Jenkins 2005:251).

In his work on Star Trek fans, Jenkins explores the ways that fans utilize the original text in a reincorporation process that serves to rewrite the stories to fit their experiences and ideas. For example, many writers “characterize themselves as ‘repairing the damage’ caused by the program’s inconsistent and often demeaning treatment of its female characters” (Jenkins 255). Feminist rewrites of Star Trek illuminate the active agency of the audience; an audience that connects with the original material, while expanding its storylines to include a more inclusive, less oppressive perspective of the world. The original texts are pulled into their micro level contexts, contexts that serve to reshape the cultural products. Meaning is not permanent and stable, then, rather it is contextualized. With new media technologies—internet blogs, chat rooms, fan sites—these new products are then redistributed as valid cultural products. Thus, as Paul Willis (2005) argues, we must see consumption as one stage of a larger process, rather than an end result of production.

Janice Radway (2003) tells a similar story of the process of fans utilizing romance novels in ways that support their ideological beliefs regarding love and romance, while

also using the books as tools to cope with their day to day lives. Radway writes that much scholarly attention given to romance novels critiques the format for its perpetuation of traditional and patriarchal storylines of masculinity, femininity, love and heterosexuality. Furthermore, many storylines center around “men who at least temporarily abuse and hurt the women they purportedly love” (71). If we rely on these textual analyses we could argue such texts to be problematic, and assume that such texts will only reinforce said ideologies amongst consumers.

Radway, however, uncovers an audience response that challenges this assumption of the relationship between text and audience. Recognizing the patriarchal confines of both the storylines and the women in her study, Radway finds that the women who read romance novels use them in ways that help them negotiate their lives within these larger gendered dynamics. One woman says that romance novels provide women an opportunity to claim a “‘declaration of independence’ from their social roles of wife and mother” (70), while other women use the texts in ways that allow them to articulate the problem areas of their own lives (2003). Rather than finding that consumption reproduces structures of power, Radway argues that “we must begin to recognize romance reading is fueled by dissatisfaction and disaffection, not by perfect contentment with woman’s lot” (75).

More importantly, Radway writes that we should regard women’s uses of romance novels as evidence for articulating concrete needs and changes: “by helping romance readers to see why they long for relationality and tenderness and are unlikely to get either in the form they desire if current gender arrangements are continued, we may help to convert their amorphous longing into a focused desire for specific change” (75).

In this way, audience's uses of media products become a way for exploring and learning how individuals understand their social worlds and the problems, and this information can then be used to deal with larger social issues.

Like Janice Radway and Henry Jenkins, Mary Rogers (2003) tells a story of media products, with hegemonic gendered and sexualized meaning embedded within, and how those dominant ideologies are not always reinforced through their consumption. Rogers discusses Barbie, and the ways that individuals' contextual location allows for diverse readings of Barbie's situation. Often assumed to be appropriately gendered as a feminine woman (relying on a framework that automatically attaches femininity to women's bodies), and heterosexual, Rogers argues that Barbie is in fact open for interpretation, and can be seen as a challenge to gender constructs that rely on assumptions of naturalization. She argues that "in no uncertain terms Barbie demonstrates that femininity is a manufactured reality" (95) and tells the story of Michael Osborne, a Barbie collector, who reads Barbie in ways that incorporate drag queen culture. Further, Rogers illustrates how Michael's (and others) uses of Barbie challenge the relationship between female bodies and femininity. Thus, Barbie is not a product that uniformly reinforces embodied and ideological assumptions of female femininity; rather, she can be read and used queerly in her ability to "define, commodify, and mutate sexual identity" (Berrett quoted in Rogers, 96).

Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2001) engage in grounded audience research, also with goals that extend beyond the direct confines of the media. These scholars explore the potential ways that media images shape white American's ideas, impressions, and knowledge about black Americans, and incorporate this into a broader

perspective of race relations in the United States. For example, the authors ask the question, “how might media contribute to White’s stereotyping of Blacks?” and “how might news stimulate Whites’ negative emotional responses to Blacks?” (59). These questions situate media within a larger social context, where media images come to impact, materially, the interactional dynamics between whites and blacks. The media is seen then as a mediating force between blacks and whites.

One theme that emerged from their study is that white respondents who had less interpersonal social contact with blacks were more likely to rely upon media images as “factual” information about black people’s lives (2001). For example, one respondent stated that (when asked if stories about black people on the news were accurate), “Just the violence and the welfare stories are always negative about blacks....I think for the most part they’re accurate, but I think they bring it on themselves” (35). And yet this same respondent recognizes that “I don’t see that in the people that I deal with” (35). The authors illuminate, then, how individuals’ use of media images confront and struggle with experiences in reality (2001). One conclusion the authors make is that “media play an ancillary but nonetheless important role in depleting racial understanding, tipping the balance toward suspicion and even animosity among the ambivalent majority of White Americans” (44).

Joshua Gamson argues that “it may no longer be enough to think so simply about invisibility and stereotyping” (1998:21), and instead explores the varied sexual discourses that emerge from tabloid talk show, and the impact on participants and audiences. As previously stated, Gamson explored what he calls the “paradox of visibility,” relying on a framework of Gramscian hegemony; a struggle over meaning, over power. Queers on

talk shows are now invited to engage in the dialogue, and have the opportunity to challenge the authority of the (historic) doctors and professionals who have laid claim to queer bodies and lives (1998). Gamson quotes Kate Bornstein, a transgender activist, who appeared on the *Joan Rivers* show:

Excuse me, no, we're not working on the issue of gender roles, we're working on the issue of attraction and do we love each other and do we still love each other as people.... The three of us have lived this life, right, and it's because of shows like yours that we're able to talk about this life and get this life out so that other people can see that we are now talking about our own lives (104).

This participation challenges what Gamson refers to as “the authoritative voices of the natural order” (104), and what emerges is a multiplicity of truths (1998). At the same time, the format of these shows, and the race and class based dynamics embedded within audience-guest-host interactions, create a sort of “freakshow,” akin to Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle.” Thus the specific format of the tabloid talk show that Gamson describes clearly illustrates a context whereby producers, guests, and audiences engage in a game of “hot potato” in the challenge over constructing meaning, gaining legitimacy, and granting cultural power.

Reuben May (1999) also researches audience responses to television, however, his work was an ethnographic exploration into tavern culture, and televisions place within this contextual location. May notes that “television programs are representations, reflections, and products of culture that have become central points of reference for many viewers throughout the world” (1999:69). (As a point of reference, while on an exchange trip in Normandy, France, I was frequently referred to jokingly as “Monica Gellar”—my last name is Edwards—one of the six main characters from the popular television show

*Friends*.) Thus, individuals incorporate television—both entertainment and news programming—into their daily lives and interactions; it becomes points of reference to help make sense of the world at large. May’s study explores tavern—drinking—culture, and how television becomes an important resource for regulars’ interactions at a small bar in a middle-class neighborhood in Chicago. May concludes that,

Tavern patrons 1) personalize thematic content from television as a way of giving it relevance to social interaction in tavern social life, 2) develop parasocial relationships—an imaginary one-sided relationship that a television viewer has with a television persona—that facilitate shared group interaction, and 3) challenge and evaluate media information as a way of reflecting on their own moral positions (70).

Clearly then, television becomes embedded within social interaction—in instigating interactions, and in developing and maintaining identities in social contexts.

More specifically, May argues that “people look to television to make sense of some of their personal experiences concerning sex and intimacy” (80). For example, patrons delve into personal conversations about their intimate lives, using talk shows as a starting point. Note the following conversation May reported:

Moe: See. Only those people that call there [phone sex hotline] wanna hear that kind of stuff.

R: Yeh. It takes a certain kind of person to call those hotlines.

Moe: I had a man or somebody that would call me at 1 o’clock in the morning. He called for about a month straight. He would call and breathe in the phone and that was it. One night he called me and I said to him, ‘I been waiting on you to call so I can get my nuts off.’ He hung up the phone on me and ain’t called since. See I think he used to get his nuts off by calling me up and intimidating me. As soon as I confronted him he stopped calling me (80).

Moe shifted the conversation from the talk show story line to his own personal life, and furthermore, interpreted the talk show via his personalized, contextual framework of

experience (May, 1999). He used television as a tool for more personalized interactions; it allowed him to discuss his personal experience within an acceptable space, a space created by the topic of the talk show on the television.

Cynthia Fuchs (2005) and Mimi Schippers (2002) have explored similar processes of audience interpretation and meaning making. Both scholars explored music as a site for hegemonic struggles over meanings of sexuality and gender. In addition, both scholars situated the musicians within the dynamic, as well as exploring the audience's role in the struggle for meaning and power. In Schippers' study, the alternative hard rock scene became the primary location for both the male and female participants to reorganize a more egalitarian gendered and sexed subculture. Through the process of "gender maneuvering" individuals played with gender and sexuality to alter the patriarchal and heteronormative scripts embedded within interactions. Schippers writes of an interaction between two women (who identify as heterosexual) who through their interaction first performed, and second dismantled heterosexism (2002), during "a playful banter about who deserved membership in the 'lesbian club' and 'bitch club.'" [And] by the tone of their exchange, it was clear that there was something admirable about being a lesbian and a bitch" (128-9).

Fuchs writes of a similar dynamic, focusing more on the interactional dynamics of live music performances—how the bands' performance shapes the space, and the audience. As she writes, "...this experience of 'something else' may have been the function of a particularly hot moment. But what I want to stress here is the productive interplay of performance and authenticity, the ways that sexualized acts and exchanges can 'speak,' display a range of identities that are otherwise rendered invisible precisely

because they're attached to such acts and exchanges" (418). Thus, the performance of the band opens up the space for queer representations, and is inclusive in its acceptance of the range within the audience.

Fuchs argues for the importance of context in shaping experience and meaning, as she observed many performances of the same band, and saw a multitude of reactions to the same action. She writes,

Breedlove's donning of the dildo, for instance, can play differently for different crowds. I've seen the band perform for a mostly straight audience in Madison, Wisconsin, as well as for mostly lesbian audiences at other sites in D.C., and in each instance, she has pulled out the dildo and solicited an audience member to come on stage to 'suck my dick!' While the possible meanings of this scene shift, depending on the gender and sexuality of the volunteer (and these may not always be immediately or ever clear), the easy read is that it constitutes a kind of continuum, of act and reaction, of attractive illusion and material reality (420).

Thus, there is no possible way for this act to acquire some stable meaning; rather, the meaning of the act is constantly shifting, and the meanings that emerge exist along a continuum of meaning. Here meaning is negotiated between performer and audience, and is shaped by contextual location of place and individual (gender and sexuality).

What these authors do is tell stories of processes where texts rich with dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality—and race and class—are reworked and analyzed and reincorporated in ways that threatens hegemonic dominance. The texts are renegotiated and a multiplicity of meaning emerges. John Fiske (2005) calls this "popular discrimination" a process that "focuses on the conditions of consumption of art rather than those of its production" (218), so that the relevance of art "is the interconnections between a text and the immediate social situation of its readers" (216).



### **Queering Media/Audiences—How I am Entering the Conversation**

My study sits at the intersection of these two bodies of literature—the sociology of sexualities and media. More importantly, my study responds to the stated gaps in both areas: 1) queering sociology and 2) moving beyond the text. As seen in my explorations of the literature on the sociology of sexualities, it seems that most queer sociology is theoretical in scope. Certainly this is important, however, this theory would only benefit from empirical support. It is my goal to spring board into a project that will seek to study sexuality using a queer theoretical perspective, paying particular attention to the queering of public space via the media.

For all of queer theory's important contributions to our conceptual understanding of how sexuality operates at both the macro and micro levels, the question remains how this queering impacts people's lives. Are individuals destabilizing sexual identity categories and challenging power dynamics in the same ways that academic sociologists are? If so, how is this affecting people's relationships to their and others' sexualities? We sociologists know that sexuality is fluid, but do the sexual agents out and about—living, breathing, having penetrative sex, oral sex, giving birth, remaining celibate, using dildos, using condoms, having sex against their will, having affairs, having sex without love, having sex for love, remaining monogamous, having multiple sex partners, having same sex, having solitary sex, having trans sex, abstaining from sex until marriage—in the world, experience their sexuality as fluid? If so, how do they talk about their sexuality? How do they negotiate their sexual behaviors with themselves and with others in such a context?

And furthermore, I'd like to explore how the media has shaped this process. As queers have gained visibility in television, music, and the internet, has this facilitated also a process of queering public space and/or sexual identities? Janice Irvine stated in 2003 that "sociology made visible the diverse social worlds of sexual cultures long before *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, or *Sex in the City* made them routine" (438). If, then, the media has made diverse sexual cultures routine, what then are the implications; how does this filter back and influence both the discipline and the individuals operating in the world? The existing literature that grapples with such questions over relies on the texts, at the expense of the audiences and their everyday lives.

As a consequence, I have explored how changing representations of sexuality—from the rise in GLBT characters to raunch culture—are shaping people's lives, both in their relationships within and outside of the media. As Fiske (2005) argues, media consumption happens in a grounded context; so then, how does this contextualization shapes how individuals experience the media, and what they do with those experiences in every day life? These are but a few of the questions that are left to be explored, and that have been taken up directly in this project. And certainly, as Ken Plummer (2003) argued, these questions are inherently political questions, as the answers have implications for institutions, for discourses, and for dynamics of power and privilege.

What you will find in this study is an in-depth exploration of the lives of both homosexual and heterosexual men and women who rely on the media as a core structure of their everyday lives. Chapter two deals with the methodological assumptions that drove my research process, in addition to a description of my research methods, participants, and the various fields—both in-person and on-line—that I actively engaged

with. From there I will move into my data analysis, which is organized into three chapters. Chapter three centers around the ways in which individuals construct their identities, using GLBT media representations as a resource in this process. GLBT media representations have opened up the space for new identity work. Gays and lesbians make clear how media is used in their processes of coming out as gay and lesbian, as well as their experiences in negotiating their identities across different life experiences. Furthermore, queer media also has a clear impact on heterosexual identities, opening up the space for more fluid understandings of (hetero)sexuality, and sheds some light into how heterosexuals construct their identities in the context of gay and lesbian visibility, in addition to how they struggle to disentangle their understanding of themselves as heterosexual from macro level power structures that privilege heterosexuality at the expense of homosexuality. Chapter four moves the analysis away from identities, and towards interactions and communities. What is evident here is that individuals rely upon the media as a resource in organizing interactions and building interpersonal relationships and communities. This process, as evidenced in my interviews, focus groups and on-line discussion forums, makes clear that the ways that media is used in everyday life.

The final chapter is a case study of *The L Word*, a television show that first premiered in 2004, and has as of yet received little academic attention. This chapter, while it pays attention to textual analysis and political economics secures its focus on the audiences of this groundbreaking show, exploring the audiences' reactionary conversation about the politics of representation. I will then conclude with a discussion of the overarching themes of my research, as well as a discussion that deconstructs what I have learned from this study to articulate directions for future scholarship.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

#### **The Path to this Project: A Brief Auto-Ethnography**

I've already stated that it was my own personal experiences that led me to this project. My own coming out story has media texts intimately tied up into it—for one, I was listening to *The Indigo Girls* on my walkman (yes, it was a walkman) when I admitted to myself that I was a lesbian. As my participants talked about television shows such as *The L Word*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Will & Grace*, I was able to converse with them directly as I am personally—and professionally—committed to those same shows. When I noticed that the lesbian community was very significantly engaged with *The L Word* as the first full-cast representation of the lesbian community, I did so easily because my friends were engaged in the very same conversations I was observing on-line. I care about lesbian representation as a sociological media scholar, and as a lesbian television watcher. Amanda Lotz writes that,

As media researchers sought to advance conceptions of the audience as active and powerful, often the most denigrated forms (soap operas) and groups perceived as least powerful (women, the working class, yet only occasionally ethnic minorities) were chosen as sites of research. Although qualitative audience study developed in this way for reasons different than in anthropology, it still bears the legacy of a colonizing gaze. Audience research rarely focuses on groups to which the researcher belongs or has

belonged (in this second case, the researcher's position as member is greatly downplayed (2000:460).

In the spirit of feminist ethnographic research, and in response to Lotz' quote above, I find it important to state that while I am the researcher in this project, I am also an avid pop culture consumer, as well as a member of the lesbian community. So, for example (as will be described below in further detail), when I was at a local gay and lesbian bar airing an episode of *The L Word* writing field notes about the experience of group-based public television watching, it could and should be noted that some of the people that were also there are friends of mine, and that I am a semi-regular customer at that bar, even when I'm not engaged in the research process. This most certainly created the space for me to engage with my research participants as an equal, even while it was made clear and obvious that I was there first and foremost as a researcher. It also allowed our conversations to take a taken-for-granted approach to discussing media texts; that is, my participants did not need to explain (with a few minor exceptions), textually, the shows, movies, websites, and music bands they found important to their life experiences. Of course, this can also be problematic, as losing their description could mean losing some pieces of how they make sense of what they are seeing in the media.

### **Conceptualizing the Audience**

Media audiences, as objects of study, have largely been ignored. This has left a significant gap in sociological approaches to media studies. There are a few reasons for this gap, which I will both explain and respond to. I will also argue

why I feel the audience is both a useful, and necessary, category of sociological analysis. Historically, media audience research attended to quantitative methods, exploring causality. Lotz (2000) writes that,

Media studies did not take qualitative methods or audience reception as , as its starting point. Rather, post-World War II U.S. media research used quantitative research methodologies, often in experimental settings with a focus on “effects,” that is, scientific causality (Lotz 2000:448).

This model, referred to as ‘media effects,’ and has tended to focus on concerns over violence and sexuality, while assuming children as the primary audience (Gauntlett 1998, Jenkins 2006). Moreover, this body of research presumed these ‘effects’ to be problematic, and to have a direct impact on behavior. Thus, these scholars argued certain types of texts (explicit violence, sexuality) would produce predictable behaviors in audiences.

This work, however, studies media reception outside of the context of the everyday world. For example, Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that it is shortsighted to argue that media violence causes violent behavior, when much of this body of work doesn’t explore other areas of people’s lives where violence might exist, such as in homes, neighborhoods, and at work. Thus, media audience work was expanded, primarily through the work of the Birmingham School, shifting away from an “effects” model to a viewpoint of audiences that was reflexive and active and complex.

That said, there are still some critiques of “audiences” as a category of social analysis. Ruddock (2008) writes that ‘audiences’—who they are, what they do and where they fit into cultural productions—is a fluid term” (2). Audiences are an elusive

category to define. Furthermore, Lotz (2000) references Ang, pointing out importantly that we must avoid theorizing the audience as sharing a “unified individuality” (449). That is, audience work must be sure to see audiences as a group without collapsing individual differences that exist among the group. I see the “audience” as a group, however, I conceptualize “audience this way without erasing individuality. When I refer to “the audience” throughout this work, I am referring to when individuals who share a common text come together to experience that text, such as on-line, at a bar, a couple watching a show together, etc... The audience, in this study, refers to a group of people engaging in conversations and negotiations over textual meaning and import. What makes the audience “the audience” is the shared text, while it is understood that there is no shared meaning, just a shared commitment to the possibilities of the text. This approach also supports a reason to stay committed to “the audience,” because, as Ruddock (2008) also argues, the “audience’ still matters to audiences” (3).

### **Queer Lens—A Methodological Approach**

This project uses a queer lens in exploring the relationship between media and sexuality in everyday life, where queer represents disruption and change. As a result, my focus is on how sexuality is changing, or rather, shifting; how sexualities, as expressed in everyday life, are being transformed. It is my belief that media texts, such as *The L Word* (explored in depth in Chapter 4), are playing a significant role in instigating such a conversation in everyday life. Using a queer lens does not mean interviewing queer identified individuals, but rather looks at how life is being *queered* through changing approaches to, and ideas about, sex(uality). Halperin argues that “queer is by definition

whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Moore 2007, p.9). I regard queer as anything that challenges heteronormativity, binary structures of sex/gender/sexuality, universalizing explanations of sexuality, and/or essentializing discourses. Or, as D’Acci (2004) notes, referencing Doty, queer is “...an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with or limited by notions of binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm” (379).

The focus of this research project is the queer challenge facing media audiences as we are exposed to and seeking out more and more GLBT media content. My approach follows the trajectory of Sally Hines’ queer sociology that “examines how power is discursively produced and materially produced and resisted at the macro level, alongside analyzing subjective experience at a micro level” (2006, p.52). Within this framework, I will explore how macro level institutions such as the media, and the cultural discourses that emerge from media texts, are incorporated into the micro level of everyday life. I agree with Sasha Roseneil who writes, “...the ideas and images of the sexual which permeate our every day world through popular culture are of considerable importance in framing the cultural imaginaries within which people lead their lives and construct their identities and relationships” (2000, p.3.15). Media texts such as *The L Word* and *Six Feet Under*—shows frequently referenced by my participants—should be taken seriously, not as static cultural objects, but as dynamic components of a larger process of meaning making and a primary location through which individuals insert and situate themselves into their culture.



In addition, as a scholar, I realize the potentiality to recreate that which I hope to deconstruct. As D'Acci (2004) notes in reference to gender television scholarship, "...we face the importance of not replicating (even inadvertently) the gender binary while we demonstrate its cultural construction, or while we fight against the injustices it fosters" (380). It is my goal to structure my work as a queer project, as noted above, that explores the queering of everyday life as told through the narratives of my participants. Furthermore, I will approach and present my own analysis and theorizing of these everyday life narratives in ways that promote a queer philosophy. I believe this to be important as a queer approach—whether a methodological, theoretical, or written—directs our attention towards change and possibility, and away from (without rendering invisible) inequality. My work here, then, remains committed to the possibilities of social justice.

### **Researching On-line**

I thought about this study for quite some time before I actually sat down to determine my research design. Qualitative methods were a natural fit with the goals of the study, and are in line with the larger methodological assumptions about the field of sociological/feminist media studies. The questions that I had in regards to the processes and everyday uses of audience's interpretations of media texts warranted face-to-face interviews and participant observation data. Amanda Lotz (2000) argues that "a number of assumptions about the nature of media and attributes of the audience are at the heart of the decision to do qualitative research" (448). As my study is particularly interested the

rich details of how media becomes embedded into our daily interactions, quantitative methods would fall short of accomplishing this agenda.

Internet-based research is still relatively new to the methodological world. As scholars are exploring the internet as a fruitful site for data collection, we are able to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of these methods. As I have incorporated what Ward (1999) has termed “cyber-ethnography” into my research methods, I will be adding to the conversation on sociological approaches to internet-based research, exploring the ups and downs of such a methodological approach. Ward (1999) argues that “cyber-ethnography” is a project that takes “seriously online interactions in their own right, exploring them through a reflexively sensitive process that includes active involvement in online settings and interviews with participants (Ward quoted in Hine, 2004:2.2). Thus, engaging in this type of research does not simply mean observing what individuals are saying on-line; but rather it is expected that I, the researcher, become both involved on-line, as well as seek out on-line participants for “off-line” (that is, off the forum, though often still on-line through email communication) discussion. Hanmer (2005) agrees that this is an important approach when she writes that “computer mediated communication can reveal new discourses and meanings for social and cultural development” (3). As will be seen in future chapters, I have in fact come to hear new and changing discourses on sexuality that emerge through on-line and in-person conversations about media texts.

I came to include this approach after spending time both “lurking” and participating in two on-line discussion forums focused on Showtime’s show about lesbians in L.A., *The L Word*. My entrance into cyber-ethnography was a mix of

personal and professional motivations. Did I start watching *The L Word* because I am a sociologist whose primary research agenda has centered around popular culture and sexuality, or did I start watching *The L Word* because I am a lesbian woman who has a history of seeking out GLBT media? To be quite frank, I'm not sure that I can answer this question, as they are both true statements. The same can be said for my trips to [ourchart.com](http://ourchart.com) and [afterellen.com](http://afterellen.com), where I became interested in reading women's ideas about the show. Importantly, however, as a scholar I knew immediately that the conversations that were happening on-line were important sociologically speaking, and deserved to be placed under the sociological lens. Every week, for example, hundreds of people go on-line to [afterellen.com](http://afterellen.com) to discuss—ranging from critiques of writing and acting, to emotional reactions to storylines, to discussions about which characters are the “hottest”, to frustrations with stereotypes—that week's episode of *The L Word*. This participation illuminates the importance of queer media in individuals' lives, and exploring these conversations can shed light on *why* this is so.

Engaging in internet-based research has its positives and negatives, as does any methodological approach. I'd like to spend some time here dealing with the most important of these pros and cons. Un-ironically, just as it is sometimes argued that the very thing that attracts us to someone is the same thing that comes to annoy us the most, some of the downsides of this type of research are a direct consequence of the upsides. For example, in my experience, and this is echoed by other scholars who have used similar methods, the anonymity of the internet creates an interesting dynamic of safety and community.

In the three forums that I spend the most time in, participants are required to establish memberships in order to become active members (that is, individuals who both “talk” and “listen”). For example, AfterEllen averages about 400 members on-line during peak hours, and 4000 guests perusing the site. And, while the membership numbers are high (, and there are limited signs of off-line relationships, I do believe that participants come to feel a part of a community of similar minded individuals. Thus, there is an interesting mix of comfort in community and anonymity that allows participants to engage in complex and honest discussion of issues. That is, in my observations, whether about soap operas, primetime dramas and comedies, or cable-television shows, individuals took the conversations well beyond televisional “gossip.” These T.V. watchers are not the “boobs” supposed in the phrase “boob tube.”

For example, in a “televisionwithoutpity” thread about the show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, a conversation thread was started to discuss homosexuality in the show. This discussion—about the show in its entirety—forum had 254, 434 replies. This conversation started in response to a new intimate storyline between two of the female lead characters (that has since been terminated as a storyline in the show). This on-line discussion thread went well beyond the scope of the show, and became a conversation amongst many individuals—who identified as straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual, as well as many more who remained sexually unidentified—about personal experiences, the politics of queer media representations and queer politics in general. These individuals feel comfortable in this on-line community engaging in what is a very public conversation (given the nature of the internet, of course). As stated previously, I believe

it is a combination of the feeling of community and the relative anonymity that allows for such levels of comfort. This allows us to witness these conversations, to engage with these conversations, and to learn from them as sociologists.

On the same token, the anonymity of the on-line environment is also problematic methodologically. While we can learn an immense amount from the discourses that emerge from these conversations, we are unable to appropriately contextualize them in order to be able to explore what is behind the statements being made. For example, one woman wrote the following about *Grey's Anatomy* (about the new storyline that has two previously identified straight women entering into an intimate relationship with each other):

The truth is that sexual identity is imposed upon people in a lot of complicated ways, and desire is unpredictable. So I'm interested in where this is going and think it's an appropriate plot for a show about heterosexuality and its malcontents.

Another poster writes as part of this same conversation that,

because if you idealize the one lesbian couple, then you're separating them from the world of the show, and depicting them as Other, when for me, the ideal is for the straight relationships and the gay relationships to all address the same (or similar struggles). Like they do on *Brothers & Sisters*.

While I am very interested in the dynamics of this conversation, and the very clear way that these audience members are engaged in a critical analysis of the show by making heterosexuality visible, as well as articulating a fear of "othering" the lesbian relationship, I am unable to fully explore how these participants came to their conclusions. That is, while I do know from the full text of one of the postings that one of

the above viewers is a lesbian, I do not know the others sexual identity, nor do I know where they are from, their education level, their age, their race, their socio-economic status, or their profession. Thus, while I can analyze the discourse that emerges from these on-line conversations, I am unable to fully explore how this discourse came to be; what are the contextualized factors that bring people into such conversations in the first place. What I do know is that the people who participate on-line choose to engage in politically charged conversations about the television shows they watch.

That said, I do believe, as argued in methodological discussions, that on-line forum observations would be best served in conjunction with more direct contact with participants (Hine 2004). Thus, some of the in-person interviews—mostly conducted via email—included as part of this study are with members of these on-line communities. This method, while relatively new to the research scene, has been utilized successfully, as noted in Driver's (2007) work on queer girls and popular culture, where she argued that using on-line forums and then e-mail as part of her methods allowed her to “engage with queer girls in ways that did not seem detached from the media environments in which they use, read, and chat about popular culture” (52).

### **Description of Data and Data Collection Process**

It has already been made clear why I have chosen qualitative methods; now I will shift my attention to a rich description of my experiences in the field. I have obtained data from numerous sources, adding to the breadth and depth of information. My first stop in this process was the time spent, as described earlier in this chapter, in on-line discussion forums, mainly *televisionwithoutpity*, *afterellen*, and *ourchart*.

Televisionwithoutpity is owned by Bravo, and hosts both user-led discussion forums as well as episode guides and recaps written by staff. The discussion forums that I spent the most time in were those discussing the television shows *Grey's Anatomy* and *Brothers & Sisters*. Afterellen is owned by Logo, which is owned by MTV. Afterellen is a website focused on the intersection of lesbian life and popular culture, and includes articles, columns, blogs, videos, and user-driven discussion forums. While I read the articles and columns on this site regularly, I spent the most time here in the discussion forum centered on *The L Word*. Ourchart is a website that was launched (and has since shut down as a separate site and is operating through the Showtime website) by the creators of *The L Word*, a few actors on the show, and sponsored by Showtime. It is an interesting example of how the line between television and internet is blurring. All of these sites are examples of how the process of engaging with television, for example, doesn't stop once the show is over. Instead, audiences continue both the experience of watching, and their reflections on watching on-line (as well as at work, at home, at bars, etc...).

While the corporate ownership of these companies certainly shapes the content of the sites, in the discussion forums, it is the fans—the everyday people going on-line—that are driving the conversations. On each site, users are able to start their own conversation threads, and to direct the course of the conversation. Furthermore, on each site in general, and in my observations on afterellen in particular, the moderators aren't just monitoring the conversations for inappropriate language or references, but they are participating in the conversations as well, as fully engaged as the everyday user who is not employed by the site.

It was in these forums, engaging in these conversations with other media watchers and thinkers that helped me to develop my research questions as well as my research design. I immediately thought that these conversations were important, and would become a central research location. At the same time, however, I knew that this alone would not be sufficient. I wanted the opportunity to follow up with some of these audience members outside of the context of the discussion forums; to engage with them one-on-one. From there, I organized two focus groups, and 35 interviews. I also spent time watching, observing, and speaking to audiences during the watching process—at two local bars, during airings of *The L Word*. My design allowed for interesting access, and thus for quality description and analysis. I was able to observe people in their everyday lives in real time as they engaged with the media, both on-line and while watching television. And importantly, I was able to follow up these observations with interviews so as to hear more directly from my participants, to make their voices clear, and to explore important issues in depth.

My time spent in the field—both virtual and real—share in common the opportunity to engage in participant observation, and to see in real-time everyday life how audiences experience and relate to and with the media, and how this shapes their sexualities. While it could be said that I “happened upon” the discussion forums as an “aca-fan” (Jenkins 2006), and that this fueled my research project, I made a concrete decision as I engaged in my research design to run focus groups. I felt that focus groups would add an important element of data collection to this project. During my preliminary review of on-line discussion boards as I was thinking through my project it was evident



that queer audiences' reactions to queer television goes beyond the individual; there is a frequent reference to the queer community at large. Certainly, on-line conversations indicate this as well, given the community dynamic of discussion boards. Focus groups, then, could serve as an "in-person" discussion forum; recreating the on-line discussion in an in-person setting, and ensuring an opportunity for me to get the benefits of in-person contact that are lost on-line. As Morgan states, "such interaction offers valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among the participants" (1996:139). What these experiences came to share in common, was to talk to the community of watchers, both in-person and on-line, to begin to explore what were the important issues that should be taken up further during in-person interviews. For example, it was during one focus group that I realized the extent to which some individuals use media texts in complex ways as they negotiate various social interactions. From there, I was able to really think through the kinds of questions I asked my one-on-one interview participants.

Though I planned initially to run four focus groups, I wound up running only two groups, each with four people, still relying on the logic of "segmentation" that "builds a comparative dimension into the entire research project" (Morgan, 1996:143). The groups were mixed in terms of both gender and sexual orientation, and consisted of individuals who knew each other prior to the focus group. I sought out a focus group participant "leader" who helped me compile enough participants for the focus group. This was helpful, as not only were the focus group participants already comfortable with each other, but they were also people who had, prior to the focus group, had "watching parties" together; that is, they were acquaintances and friends who had spent time

interacting with the media. The focus groups took place in public meeting rooms on a college campus, and lasted approximately 2 hours. After two focus groups, I felt I had enough focus group data to move forward with my in-person interviews.

My interviews happened both in-person and through email. The in-person interviews took place at local coffee shops and/or restaurants of the participants choosing; they lasted in range from 1-2 hours. In-person interviews were recorded digitally, and transcribed word for word from recording. I used an interview protocol as a guide, however, I remained focused on the trajectory the participants were going with the conversation, and allowed for follow up questions to emerge from the context of our conversation rather than following a strict interview protocol. This, along with the depth and dearth of knowledge regarding GLBT media allowed for the interviews to feel more like conversations; with this in mind, however, I remained conscious to keep my participation to a minimum. I participated in the conversation enough to help establish a solid rapport, while making sure that my participation didn't lead or direct the conversation.

E-mail interviews came about through my participant observations in on-line discussion boards. My on-line profile in each forum made clear that I was a graduate student engaging in dissertation research. With permission from the site managers, I posted requests for participants, and included my email address, asking willing people to contact me for off-line emails. In addition, I posted questions and comments within the discussion boards, again making my researcher presence known. For those individuals who contacted me, I responded by informing them of my project and my goals, and

together we agreed on how to proceed with the interviews over email. I asked each individual a series of basic questions about their lives and their media consumption, and we agreed to a back and forth email exchange. Most email interviews were conducted through an exchange of 4-5 back and forth emails. My follow up emails were grounded in their initial responses and comments. (For a full list of participants, including demographic information, and the format of our interview (in-person or email) see Appendix A). Each in-person interview was transcribed following the event. E-mail interviews were compiled into transcript format. From there, I coded the interviews, highlighting themes from the conversation. After coding for themes, I then moved forward to construct an outline for the presentation of the data.

### **Analytic Framework**

My data makes it clear that media consumption is a much more complex issue than can be gleaned from exploring texts and responses to texts. Rather, individuals make use of the media by integrating media stories and texts into their everyday lives. This expands the sociological conversation regarding media audiences. What I heard from media audiences is that the media is an important resource in everyday life. Media scholars discuss texts and representations at length, and this study both supports and challenges these largely theoretical and ideological conversations. This study illuminates that hegemonic meanings embedded in texts are interpreted in contexts that make clear hegemony as a site of struggle rather than a site of passive acceptance. Representations can be real in their (imagined) consequences. This research illuminates that media texts have far more uses than simply analyzing the meaning in the text and the interpretation of

text. My interview participants make clear that their usage of GLBT media representations, while sometimes involves discussions regarding the content of the text, more often is used as a site for constructing identities and communities, and as an interactional tool.

At the same time this study argues the uses of media in everyday life, I also focus the lens on the social construction of sexualities, providing empirical data documenting queer ideological, discursive, and behavioral shifts instigated at the intersection of media text and media audience. Furthermore, my data also makes clear how sexualities are shifting as audiences consume GLBT media; that this is happening to heterosexual audiences as well most certainly opens up new avenues for understanding heterosexualities in queer ways.

My data chapters became what they are through a grounded approach; that is, my focus on identities came from the overwhelming presence of conversations about and negotiations with identities in my interviews and “cyber-ethnography.” Here the focus is less on a social psychological understanding of what identities mean to their holders, but in illuminating how identities are (re)constructed, negotiated, and shared, in a specific context of increased representation of GLBT in the mainstream and alternative media. This connects the literatures on sexualities with the literature on media, as I discuss everyday life at the intersection of sexual identities and media representations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND MEDIATED IDENTITIES

#### Introduction

As stated in Chapter One, when scholarly attention focuses on analyzing texts, the contours of everyday life are subtle at best, and missed entirely at worst. While it is important and fruitful to explore the institutional dynamics that create some texts and silence others, and to use texts as mediums to discuss social arrangements and power dynamics, we can't use this information to make assumptions about how these same texts get used by people in their everyday lives. In this chapter, I will explore how individual audience members use media texts as part of the process of constructing and reconstructing their sexual identities. The changing media landscape has seen, of late, an increase in representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters and storylines. The audience members that I spoke to through in depth interviews told stories of how this increased representation has created the space for constructing queer identities—that is, identities that are understood as historically located, as fluid, and that see gay, lesbian, and straight identities as important elements of self, but are struggling to free their identities from structures of power. The media emerges as an important component of this process. As Kellner writes, “radio, television, film and other products

of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, or sexuality” (1995:5).

Amber Ault (1996) argues that identity is “a discursive product made meaningful by its structural context” (450), and in this chapter, I argue that GLBT representations serve as a site of such a “structural context” given their emergence from the institution of the mass media (and to be clear, the media products most often referred by my interview participants were mainstream mass media products). Thus, increased GLBT media representations are changing the very context through which individuals are constructing their sexual identities. This development is highlighted here. Throughout the data gathering process a clear theme emerged regarding the ways that people use the media, and specific media stories, as markers of time, of major life moments. These markers of time are also points where my participants tell stories of identity construction, illuminating how their identities shift across time and context.

Some of the moments that were discussed by participants were related to educational milestones, relationship status, and moving (often, though not exclusively, from a more rural to a more urban area). Tracy said while reflecting on the upcoming ending of *The L Word*, “I suppose it is appropriate that the show is ending now. I came back to grad school right after it started and I will finish after it ends. Since I'll be moving on in life, I guess I can leave TLW behind with my grad school years. It will always remind of the times (mostly good) that I had.” The ending of the show and the ending of her graduate work combined leave her feeling that it is “appropriate” for the show to end

now; her experience of the ending of the show is individualized, and contextualized to the life changes she is going through. What Tracy makes clear, is that uses of media go beyond what can be found in the text. Her use of the show as a closing marker for her graduate career, and as a cue for remembering her “mostly good” grad school years, is an example of ways media stories are integrated into audience members’ personal narratives; media stories then, become points of recall for important points in our lives, for defining elements of our identities.

Kasey told a similar story about *Queer as Folk* as being a marker of a break up of a long term relationship. During a focus group conversation Kasey stated that he couldn’t think of *Queer as Folk* without thinking about his single years after a long-term break up. In a follow up interview he elaborated: “And it [QAF] was also at the same time that I was single. And so after an 18 year relationship, and I felt that this relationship kept me you know, almost bottled up, of this world that I wasn’t allowed to participate in. And so for me it was like, it was release...” Like Tracy, *Queer as Folk* has become a point of recall for a specific period of Kasey’s life. *Queer as Folk* doesn’t just tell the stories of a group of fictionalized gay men living in Philadelphia; for Kasey, it also tells part of his story. *Queer as Folk* marked not just Kasey’s break up, but his experiences as a newly single gay man learning about a community<sup>1</sup> he had been unable to participate in because his ex required—and he went along—their relationship to be closeted. The show was a representation of what he had been denied for 18 years in a closeted relationship. In its way, it helped him to be okay with the loss of the

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<sup>1</sup> I will return to this issue of community in Chapter 4.

relationship, as it gave him a vision of something else. This point repeats itself in various ways throughout my interviews; that one of the consequences of increased representations of queers in the media is the opening up of spaces, is the expanding of options in everyday lives. For example, for Kasey, *Queer as Folk* represented to him possibilities that he could create for his own life; in this way, this “representation” had material consequences. This has a clear impact on the mediated context of identity construction, as these images then are used by audience members, such as Kasey, in ways that allow them to see more options for their lives.

### **Coming Out in GLBT Mediated Spaces**

Larry Gross and James Woods (1999) write that, “people are not born with the awareness that they are homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Before they can identify themselves in terms of these categories they must learn that such categories exist, discover that other people occupy them, and perceive that their own needs or attractions qualify them for membership” (75). Sexual identities are constructed within the realm of the social, and the social creates possibilities for what kinds of sexual identities are constructed. Framing the increased gay and lesbian (and the minimal increase of bisexual and transgender) media representation with a social constructionist framework makes clear the possibilities for how media stories might impact how individuals come to identify sexually. Seeing people on television and in films who identify—through the text, through language—as gay or lesbian help people “learn that such categories exist” as well as “discover that other people occupy them” (Gross and Woods 75).



In this section I will focus on the coming out process. I will illuminate the interrelationship between media and coming out using a historical perspective, as I interviewed some media audience members who came out prior to this increase in visibility. I will share the stories of my interview participants and on-line discussion board conversations, to illuminate the various ways individuals experience the media in their processes of coming out. I will also illuminate how coming out isn't something that only happens to those who come to occupy a gay or lesbian identity, by sharing the stories of heterosexuals with gay and lesbian family and friends. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, when an important friend or family member comes out, the heterosexual men and women I interviewed told stories of how their own identities shifted in response, and how they relied upon media stories in the process.

Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) argue that “media, then, functions as a significant resource for young people about possibilities for sexual subjectivity” (200). Like the youth in Jackson and Gilbertson's study, my queer participants explained that seeing gays and lesbians in the media—both real and fictional—has had a profound impact on their coming out experiences. Coming out narratives are not new to the research agenda, in fact, they, and the closet that such stories are connected to, are arguably the most researched component of the lives of gays and lesbians. However, the ways these stories are intertwined with media texts is surprisingly under-researched in academia. To be clear, many scholars have made theoretical connections. For example, Seidman argues that the closet is a historical phenomenon, and anticipates that at some point we will move “beyond the closet” and changing media representations is helping push society in

that direction (2002). Dean writes that increased space to represent gays and lesbians in film is an example of the queering of sexuality, shifting away from essentialist thinking towards a more fluid understanding, and he sees this shift as inherent in the text.

Herman (2005), in her study of coming out narratives in two television show texts, argues for the political import of the media texts and the importance of her work. She writes that, “I analyse these coming out texts in some detail in order to consider how different forms of coming out have different meanings and effects” (11), and that “the sort of exploration I have undertaken here is an important aspect of understanding the shifting ground of lesbian and gay cultural representation” (22). Her focus is on how the characters in the show come out, and whether the texts rely on a discourse of identity, or a discourse of desire (2005). Missing from her study, as well as those referenced in the previous paragraph, are the voices of the gay and lesbian media audiences supposed to be affected by this increase in gay tele-visibility. My focus is not on how, if, why, or where characters come out, but rather, on how individuals use media texts as resources in their own coming out processes.

In both in my interviews and in on-line discussion forums regarding GLBT media representation, there are many accounts of the way media stories are integrated into personal coming out stories, along with age, context, and relationships. In fact, media texts aren't free-floating; rather, they may be as tangible a component of social worlds as the friends we met in college. If I were to mark important aspects of my own coming out story, I would include a few specific people I met as an undergraduate. These people were crucial to my experience. At the same time, just as crucial was my reflexivity upon

listening to, and reading about (as out lesbian women themselves) the music of *The Indigo Girls*.

My interviews reflect the fact that media representations intersect with age, geographic location, sexual identity, and gender; all are important factors in shaping these coming out stories. For example, in an email conversation with me, Seth, who is a white gay man in his 40's said that,

Prior to then I can not recall seeing a real person in the media whom I knew for a fact to be gay. Then, BOOM!! Gay men are all over my television screen. They're sick, they're frightened, they're angry and the vast majority of them would be dead before I graduated from high school. Although they showed up on various television shows, the first representation I saw of a gay man after 1982 was An Early Frost which dealt with, as I sure you know, a gay man coming out to his family at the same time he tells them he has AIDS. Later I would see Longtime Companion (around '89 I think) and like it. I think I liked it because it was well acted and gave me a sympathetic, first hand look at "ground zero" of the AIDS epidemic. Remember, I was in West Virginia not New York City when all this came about. So as much as I appreciated some films and television shows trying to put a "human" face on the epidemic, I began to long for films that dealt with people who just happened to be gay. Therein lies my reasoning for searching out some gay films over others. [referencing the film "Celebrity"]...His character is portrayed as ruining his son's life after the son finds out his father is gay. I believe he gets shot as well. Once again, not very good early GLBT representations. My point to this last addition is how important first exposure to GLBT issues in the media is to young GLBT's. One look in the wrong direction and you can feel the closet get deeper and deeper even before you know what the "closet" is.

This account shows how media representations interacted with his geographic location, age, historical time period, and his ideas about himself and the larger gay community. He expressed how AIDS shaped his experience with coming out in the context of AIDS focused media representation. All his exposure, as a youth, to gays in the media involved

illness and this complicated his coming out by slowing it down, as he said, “you can feel the closet get deeper and deeper.” It also directed his desire for something different, and influenced how he understood himself and his experience with media. Gay identity isn’t enough to connect to gay media, particularly if the media one has access to feels problematic. Though Seth concludes by depersonalizing his description by referring to “young GLBT’s” he brought the conversation back to himself at another point during the interview:

To wrap up this session, I need to tell you about two examples of gay characters I saw on film around this time. The first was a film I saw late one night on HBO. I was 15 or 16. I can't remember it's title. But the film was about a gay man and lesbian who fall in love. I remember clearly that they were presented as gay/lesbian at the beginning of the film. He went to bath houses and she had just broken up with a girlfriend. Didn't do much to help me honestly. In fact it bothered me greatly.

Seth’s exposure to media representation was not always helpful; *how* gays and lesbians are shown is as important as *that* they are present in the media. Larry Gross and James Woods (1999) write that, “positive experiences facilitate lesbian or gay identity formation, providing opportunities for an individual to obtain information about the community, to reexamine his or her own ideas about homosexuality, and to see similarities between him or herself and those labeled ‘homosexual’” (76). Seth’s experiences with media representations highlight the difficulties he had in this identity construction process, in the comparisons he was making between himself, and the largely HIV infected gay males he was seeing on television. He makes clear that being diversely reflected in media images is important, and even while his early exposure was

problematic, this does not lead him to an overall negative feeling of the media. Rather, his understanding is situated historically and geographically.

Television played a role in the coming out of Michael, a 49 year old, white, gay male. However, this event did not come about because of direct representation of gays, but his reading a “straight” text queerly:

Batman. Yep, Batman and Robin, the cheesetastic television series. It wasn't that I came to understand that my gender preferences were different (this was pre-puberty) but that whatever was going on as I watched that show was going to be a problem. It wasn't about sex, or who I was attracted to, it was realizing that it was different, not 'normal,' and I was going to have to hide it. It was a bleak time, till Bowie and the Rocky Horror Show came along. Coming out didn't happen till post-high school, though I'm not sure I was ever 'in.' Just drifted that way. To this day, I've never had 'the talk' with my individuals. I'm almost 50, at this late date, what's the point? I feel badly for not being able to share some significant portions of my life with them, but it wouldn't make them happy. In the last four years my brother has produced two wonderful grandkids, so why spoil the fun?

As a boy, watching Batman and Robin, he felt that something “was going on” while he was watching Batman and Robin, even though at the time he didn't know what it was.

Without a safe space or language to explore his identity, the media became an instigator of feelings that he understood as problematic, reinforcing the closet. This wasn't inherent in the text, but emerged in the space between silences and possibilities in both the text and his everyday life. The concept of the hidden curriculum is useful here. The lack of gay visibility in both media and his surroundings served as a subtle instruction of what is acceptable. At a young age he came to a sort of understanding of what feelings and identities were (dis)allowed. Though his experience wasn't recalled as starkly negative as Seth's (quoted previously), he did recognize that it was “a bleak time” in terms of

queer media representations, and that this was one but many factors in his coming out experience.

James Dean (2007) writes that “recent scholarship has noted a visible shift occurring in mainstream Hollywood depictions of gay and lesbian characters in the 1980’s and 1990’s. A shift away from stigmatized representations of homosexuality is evidenced...a preponderance of normal and good portrayals of homosexual characters has appeared” (366). This shift is evident in my interviews with younger gays and straights, particularly when compared to the older gay men I interviewed. Stacy, a bi-racial, immigrant lesbian in her 30’s, who grew up in a small town said that,

I don’t know what being gay is cause I haven’t seen one and everyone else is dating boys and I know that the little I know when I was watching TV back then, its kinda like “oh she looks gay.” That tennis player.....Martina Navitalova. I remember she looked different. I don’t know what lesbians supposed to look like. And I remember kinda like, “she’s kinda cool.” ...and I know if I didn’t watch all those shows I don’t think I would ever have the nerve. You know what, I don’t think I would have come out because, I’m by myself. Oh my god I’m different I don’t know who I am. Until I met people who can catch me and they’re just like me, that’s when you have the guts, and you’re like I’m gay and I’m proud and I have friends who are gonna catch me. I think that’s what a lot of, I think that’s why, I think today, well Ellen’s gay. This person’s gay and she’s fine, and you know what, it’s okay. and then you met one gay person, you’re like, you know what, I think being anything when you have that supportive...

Media images of out gays and lesbians was crucial to Stacy’s coming out process, as an immigrant woman from a small town. Guy, a Hispanic gay male also referenced the importance not just of fictional representations, but media exposure to out celebrities:

When it comes to news and reality shows that is another story as seeing a Pedro Zamorra in the 3rd season of the real world, a Ronnie on So You Want To Make Me A Supermodel, or an Anderson Cooper as gay men

leading real lives. Growing up I had no idea of what being gay meant so seeing these guys (and women like Ellen and Rosie) leading lives opens windows of possibilities. So a key point here for my own experience is that it's not been about "characters" but real people even if cast or put into situations/contests that try to frame them into playing a role of sorts.

Both Stacy and Guy indicate that the media is a location of institutional support in the face of absences elsewhere. Both Stacy and Guy list names of out pop culture icons, and indicate that these people were "company" for them, to feel less alone. When they were young, and other people surrounding them in their everyday lives weren't out, these media icons became a resource to fill that space.

Stacy and Guy, throughout the entirety of their interviews, make clear that media icons weren't the only support they needed; having people in their everyday lives to count on was necessary. However, for them, seeing gays on television opened a door for them to begin their own processes; finding other spaces of support in their lives, including meeting other gay and lesbian friends, sealed the deal. Thus, gay and lesbians on television laid the foundation of acceptability to explore their own sexualities in their everyday lives. It is well documented that historically, high schools have not been an institutionally supportive place for queer kids. As Pascoe (2006) writes in her exploration of masculinity and sexuality in a high school setting, "even though the fag discourse is and isn't about homophobia, River High as an institution was deeply homophobic. Homophobia took the form of blatant antigay practices and, more commonly, the staging of taken-for-granted heteronormative school ceremonies and traditions" (161). In this context, it becomes evident that the media can provide a base of support through representation that many high schools don't provide.

On a lesbian-focused media website a specific thread regarding the media's role in coming out was started by a forum participant. That thread received hundreds of responses (including one of my own). One woman said simply that, "after seeing willow and tara together I knew I was a dyke." For her, seeing two women in a relationship on television confirmed her sexual identity. She does not argue that seeing Willow and Tara on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is the origin point of her sexuality, rather, it was the context where she was able to substantiate her sexual identity. This process illuminates the sociality of identities, and the role that our surroundings, including media representations, play in identity construction. Having external support for the identities we occupy is important for people, and in the voices of the women on this discussion thread it becomes clear that the media can provide some of that support. As another participant writes, "this thread is really interesting. I know everyone is going to have different experiences, but to see how a tv show or movie effected you guys in the same way it did me—makes me feel that little bit less lonely you know?"

Arlene Stein (1999) writes that, "coming out is as much a practical creation of the self, a 'becoming out,' as it is a matter of revealing or discovering one's sexuality" (82). The women in this discussion thread make this clear, and highlight the role that media representations play in this self construction. For example, Sharon, a participant in this discussion writes that,

I think the most influential TV show for me was 'Buffy.' I had watched 'Buffy' since the very beginning, and I always identified with Willow. When Willow came out, I was taken aback. I had not really thought of the other option of being with the same sex. I knew about it all, but didn't think I had the option. When Willow fell in love with Tara, I think I finally opened up my mind about same-sex relations. 'Buffy' didn't really



make me realize I was gay, but it definitely helped me realize that there is more out there for me. I had been struggling with terrible heterosexual relationships, not realizing that there is a reason towards that. 'Buffy' opened that a lot by showing something else other than a heterosexual relationship.

What was important for her was how the media opened up the space for multiple choices. With *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as her example, she says that it's not that the show made her realize something she didn't already know—she knew that she was “struggling with terrible heterosexual relationships”—but it presented her with an alternative. Media representations (in this case of a narrative in a television show that involved two young, previously heterosexually identified college women (Willow and Tara) falling in love, then coming out to their friends) provided her the ability to see that she was able to make choices within a wider range of options. Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) make a similar claim in their study of (primarily heterosexual youth), arguing that the “hot” lesbian of new media representations “renders ‘lesbian’ visible, exposing young women to the possibility of being ‘lesbian’ as they negotiate their own sexual feelings” (219). Increased media representations of gays and lesbians has shifted the grounds on which the gay and lesbian men and women I interviewed constructed their queer identities; rather than a limited view of sexuality, these audience members saw more options, which included options that they felt comfortable exploring, or that they felt more accurately reflected how they had been feeling.

Stein (1999) also writes that, “a lesbian identity is learned and performed in a myriad of different ways” (82) and “for a woman trying to authenticate her lesbianism to herself and to others, early homosocial or homosexual events, relationships, and personal

feelings that may not have seemed particularly sexual or even significant at the time of their occurrence were recast to reveal a continuous lesbian history” (84). One participant in the on-line discussion made a statement that reveals the role that media stories can play in this identity work: “I’d say that I have always been attracted to strong female characters and it took me a long time to realize that my attraction to these wonderful ladies was the first indicator of my sexuality.” She uses these mediated attractions as a way to recast her life history as lesbian-identified. That is, she makes clear, when she says that “it took me a long time to realize,” that she did not experience the media stories as lesbian “at the time of their occurrence” (Stein). In my own personal experience, I have heard, anecdotally, many lesbians of my generation claim that their first lesbian crush was the character of “Jo” on *The Facts of Life*. Here, I’m not certain that this was experienced as sexual so much as it is a way to use a culturally shared representation of lesbian desire to validate a lesbian identity claim.

The voices of these women and men illuminate the complex, and yet simple, ways that media texts become embedded into our life stories and our processes of identity construction. Media representations are vehicles for coming into our sexual desires, for feeling less alone, and importantly, for realizing alternatives in a hetero-normative society. This latter point illuminates how even in the context of problematic or stereotypical representations, these individuals told stories of interpreting media texts in queer ways—by using them to map out an existence that renders normative heterosexuality impermanent and unstable. In this way, even one or two queer media texts in a sea of heterosexual ones, can function as a clear and direct challenge to such a

structure of inequality. And this challenge does not exist in the text alone. It exists in the ways that these audience members are responding to the texts, and taking that response and making it real, by coming out, by exploring these possibilities in their every day lives.

*Coming Out On-line, Queering Public Space*

Bennett and Silva (2004) argue that, “how ordinary people use technologies, artifacts and discourses to negotiate their environments relates to both private and public contexts” (13). Of course, gay visibility isn’t just happening on the small and large screens. The internet opened up another avenue for a media-assisted coming out process. At a transgender conference I attended (as a site to recruit participants), I spoke with a young trans-woman who lives in a small town in Wisconsin. Due to financial constraints, she hasn’t been able to leave her small community to move to a larger, more trans-friendly area. As a result, her sense of community has come from meeting other trans-people on-line. From my small data set, it seems that the internet was especially helpful for those GLBT individuals from smaller, more rural communities. To be clear, many of my respondents discussed their reliance on and usage of the internet; of course, many of the interviews done for this study were via the internet. However, for individuals from smaller communities the internet became a more profound resource during the coming out process.

Alex, after telling me that he didn’t have any mentors or guidance during his coming out process, said that his “primary outlet for networking was the internet. Gay.com and chat rooms and stuff, so it was a really the only way I could network and

meet people and converse with them about these things; so it was really difficult for me, there wasn't a lot of interactions, so..." Given that Alex expressed his process to be difficult, and even alienating at times, it seems that the internet is the one thing that allowed him to feel connected. In fact, he brought the issue up again later in the interview and said that "I'd have been nowhere without it [the internet]." Alex makes clear that his coming out process, was as much about constructing his own gay identity as it was connecting with others who shared the same gay identity. I will take up the issue of community and interactions in more detail in Chapter 4.

On-line discussion forums about the plot lines of television shows also become forums for coming out stories even though these forums are not necessarily intended for such purposes. However, that they happen in a space where they are not expected might make them that much more powerful. For example, if the thread is regarding a television show that is marked as "straight" (as most shows are unless they are explicitly about gay men and lesbians, such as *Will & Grace* or *Queer as Folk*), these coming out stories woven into the narrative destabilize the ability for heteronormativity to operate in such a space. That is, as discussion members come out in their forum conversations, it becomes more difficult for members to rely on heteronormativity—to assume the heterosexuality of all of the participants. Thus, these conversations are queering some public spaces of the internet.

For example, one participant in a *Grey's Anatomy* forum writes that, "They [two female characters] haven't known each other for all that long, so it's not as if there's some turn around in their relationship; it just might be realized as a different kind of bond

than they had consciously intended. That happens all the time. Hell, it happened to me” (Melissa, televisionwithoutpity). As the ending point of her commentary on the show, she throws in her own same-sex experience, while refraining from claiming an identity marker. She is arguing that the television plot is realistic, and that her life experiences can support the realism. Furthermore, her lack of an identity claim can serve to destabilize a dichotomous sexual identity structure, rendering sexuality less about identities are more about real-life behaviors and desires. This allows the notion of sexual fluidity to enter the space of this discussion forum; a space that based on my readings of the forum conversations relied on assumptions of heterosexuality prior to the plotline that involved a same-sex relationship between two of the female characters. Thus, the text of the show became the starting point of a queer conversation about sexual identity, and created space for the possibility of sexual fluidity outside a hetero/homo framework.

Another interesting theme that emerged from these discussion forums is how coming out stories force the marking of heterosexuality. We see this in post comments such as, “I’m not gay but I’m black, and I think the same thing can apply how black people are and aren’t portrayed on TV,” and another such as, “But you know, since I’m straight my opinion is totally from the outside looking in. I would never claim to have the real and true opinion of what’s good and right about anyone or anything outside my own personal experiences” (N.C. televisionwithoutpity.com). If heteronormativity operates around an invisible, normalized heterosexuality, then this forum poses a direct challenge to institutionalized heterosexuality. In the face of gay visibility, heterosexuals are marking their sexuality, and importantly, in such a way that is less defensive, and

more validating of other possibilities. As these heterosexuals mark their identities, they are not trying to make claims on behalf of gays and lesbians, nor are they making universalizing claims regarding those who occupy heterosexual identities.

To be clear, not all of the participants in this conversation mark their sexualities through the course of their conversations. We must underscore the importance of this. While both heterosexuality and homosexuality are marked as visible, that there is still the realm of unknown is important. The uncertainty in the face of knowing strips us of our ability to assume to know anything about those whose sexualities are left unsaid. Thus, through the coming out narratives that are woven into the discussion, this public space of the internet is being queered. This queering is both at times “accidental” (that is, when some people come out as gay, and others as straight, we do not know if their intent is to queer the conversation), and at times direct, as is made clear in the following statement from Anna, a participant of the forum:

I, for one, don't care if Callie and Erica live happily ever after. There's no reason to believe that either one of these characters is a closet case who's just discovering her 'true' sexual orientation. They could simply be two straight women who are attracted to one another and have to figure out what that means. In some ways, I'd find that even more subversive and interesting than a coming out story (\*yawn\*) because it destabilizes the audience's notion of heterosexuality in a more complicated way than a storyline that implies that one or both characters were just gay all along (Anna, [televisionwithoutpity.com](http://televisionwithoutpity.com)).

This participant's use of quotations around the word “true” indicates her hesitation to believe in the notion of a “true” sexual orientation; that is, she is rejecting an essentialist discourse of sexual identity and adopting a queer, fluid discourse. She shares her reading of the text as potentially political and “subversive” in its potential ability to challenge and

complicate (hetero)sexuality, not just within the text itself, but for the audience as well. Her statement can also be read as feminist, in that she is granting these two female characters sexual agency in negotiating their desire, as well as hoping for the possibility that others might read the text in similar ways. Of course, her participation in the discussion forum helps this possibility along, as she is making public her “subversive” reading of the narrative of the show.

### *Heterosexuals Come Out as Queer*

Up to this point, I have focused primarily on the coming out stories of gays and lesbians, and argued the import of media stories as a resource in these identity negotiations. In addition to interviewing gay and lesbian media users, I also interviewed heterosexual-identified women, and a few men. While there has been increasing scholarly attention to media representations of gays and lesbians, there has been scarce focus on how such representations are read, interpreted, and used by straight audiences. Interestingly, many textual analyses of queer media seem to assume a heterosexual audience. That is, the concern surrounding the maintenance of heteronormativity via queer characters’ stories is assuming such texts will allow the (straight) audience to maintain its own heteronormativity.

Diane Raymond (2002) argues that even though the increase in GLBT media representation illuminates progress, “how these shows resolve tensions often results in a ‘reinscription’ of heterosexuality and a ‘containment’ of queer sexuality...” (100). She continues with a discussion of *Will & Grace*, and writes that, “we frequently see Will and Grace in bed together” and that “Will and Grace’s behavior mirrors that of a heterosexual

couple” (106). Evan Cooper (2003) disagrees, and engages in an analysis of heterosexuals’ responses to the comedic sitcom, *Will & Grace*, exploring individuals’ perceptions of the show rather than its larger effects. He illuminates a heterosexual audience that looks at the show about Will, Grace, Karen and Jack, which is full of gay (camp) humor, in mostly positive terms. But Cooper makes clear that his piece is not intended to implore how heterosexuals use such a television show in affecting or shaping their own identities as heterosexuals.

Those studies that do exist have some problematic limitations as sociological media scholarship. Sue Jackson and Tamsyn Gilbertson (2009) interviewed a group of mostly heterosexual youth in New Zealand, inquiring into their interpretations of lesbians in the (primarily U.S. and British mainstream) media, and found that most of the youth were quite critical of stereotypical representations of lesbians, while at the same time telling a complicated story of their acceptance of “lesbians” in everyday life. Through their focus group conversations, it was made clear that girl-girl sexual behavior was complicated by heterosexual male desire, while at the same time, many of the young women held strong to fluid understandings of sexuality (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009). While this was an interesting study, what I felt was missing was a stronger connection between their interpretations of media texts (they were presented with media clips during the focus groups) and their ideas about sexuality in everyday life; the study relied heavily on discourse, and while discourse is important, it left the complexities of everyday life behavior and experiences underexplored.



Another recently published study by Bonds-Raacke et. Al. (2007) focuses on heterosexual audiences in the United States, and their responses to increased representation of gays and lesbians in the media (focusing primarily on *Ellen* and *Will and Grace*). However, a glaring problem of this study is the authors' acknowledgement that they didn't inquire into the participants sexual identity; that is, the study is founded on the assumption, rather than confirmation, that all 250 plus participants were heterosexual. This complicates the study's ability to make arguments about how "heterosexuals" feel about GLBT media, when we can't be certain the study participants even are heterosexual.

My research design allowed for participants to self-select into my study, and didn't place limits on who could participate; that is, while I made clear my mediated focus was on representations of gays and lesbians in the media, I also made clear that I was looking to interview anyone regardless of their personal sexual identity. Through both my snowball sampling, and my seeking participants on-line, almost half of my participants identified as heterosexual. All of us—whether gay or straight—are living in the context of a media drenched society, and many of us who use this media regularly (a requirement of my recruitment into the study) are exposed to the increase of gay and lesbian representations; thus, it would be shortsighted to presume that gay and lesbian audiences are the only ones impacted by this visual shift. It is sociologically problematic to assume that heterosexual audiences' experiences with GLBT media are relegated to hegemonic textual readings, as Raymond does, without speaking to audiences themselves. That is, one clear problem with much media scholarship is that it presumes

that media effects equals whether we read a text hegemonically or critically. This conflates the media with the text. What my data makes clear is that the ways audiences use media in their everyday lives is more dynamic; the individuals who make up the “audience” in this study don’t just read texts, they use texts.

The heterosexuals in my study, like the gay and lesbian participants of the previous section, told stories of ways that they used the media—and representations of gays and lesbians in particular—as a tool for their own identity construction. Many of these stories involve restructuring their heterosexual identities so as to move further away from a vision of heterosexual as a dominant category, to move away from homophobia, and to move towards a gay and lesbian friendly heterosexual identity. In this way, I interpret the heterosexuals in my study as doing “queer” identity work. None of them identified as queer, or as queer heterosexuals, rather, I am making sense of their identity work as a queer process given their goals of a vision of heterosexual identity that is less a dichotomous opposite, and power over, homosexual, and more an option within a range of possibilities.

Some heterosexual participants related media stories as markers of remembrance of when close friends and/or family members came out to them, and as tools for processing their reactions. Mark, a heterosexual male in his 30’s, related Willow’s coming out on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to that of a close friend. In his words, “I guess Buffy is relatable in this sense that when Willow came out to her friends, it’s in the same ballpark as Kate [name changed] coming out as ‘someone you first knew as straight’ is now gay.” Mark used his understanding of a television show as a resource to make sense

of his personal experience with a good friend; the way he tells his story, Buffy prepared him, in a way, for his experience with Kate. Mark also spent a portion of his career working for a fan magazine, and understands *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as being important in the life narratives of viewers. He reflected on this experience by saying that, “I was also in a unique position to hear from many Buffy fans, and Willow coming to terms with her sexuality helped a lot of kids (and adults) be more open about their sexuality (it also rankled a few people).” He sees Willow’s story as allowing the space for people to be more open; as providing the context for greater agency in constructing identities (of course, some of the quotes from the previous section of this chapter support his claim as well). His work with both media texts, media audiences, and his life experience with a now-out lesbian friend, all worked together to influence his current identity as a “straight but not narrow” heterosexual male, as well as his allowance of space in his everyday life for others’ varying identities.

Carissa, a heterosexual (though questioning) woman in her 30’s told me about her brother coming out in this way:

So my brother comes out of the closet 11 years ago. He was 21. And that was right around the time that Ellen was coming out. So, I’d always watched her show, but it was sort of like a hit or miss kind of thing, and then when I knew that she was coming out on the show I got really invested in the show, and it was sort of a swirl around with my brother. I had seen GLTB representation on TV before with three’s company and you know, a thirtysomething episode, and Roseanne, and things like that, but it wasn’t like an ongoing thing. And, I think after that I just decided that I wanted to learn everything I could so I could understand. I mean I was totally fine, the only thing I worried about was, the only thing that I was jealous-, like mad about, was that I’ll never have a sister-in-law, but, whatever, you have another brother-in-law, who cares. That was like a 5 second thing and then I got over it. Um, so but I became like a PFLAG sister extraordinaire.

I use Carissa's story, here, as a point of illuminating how identities are constructed relationally; the way she speaks about her brother's coming out is less about accepting his gay identity, and more about reshaping her identity as the sister of a gay brother. The way that Ellen's coming out timed with her brothers coming out, and her increased investment in the show, was/is a symbol for herself of her commitment and support of her brother. The media in general—and Ellen in particular—became a “language” for her to connect with her brother, and was a tool for her to use in articulating and confirming her identity as “a PFLAG sister extraordinaire.” The way she talks about her brothers coming out was framed around her identity, and about making clear to her brother where she stood. Her use of the media was a form of mediated impression management; she uses it as a tangible resource in communicating to her brother. She also uses the media as a resource for learning. Thus, she is both using the media as identity support and confirmation, but she is articulating another way—as an educational resource—of how media gets incorporated into everyday life. Both Mark and Carissa's stories show the media is used in heterosexual's identity construction process, as well as their processes of responding to friends and family members who come out as gay or lesbian. I understand the media in this context as shaping human agency; that is, this is an example of what I have come to call “mediated agency.” The media became a primary resource for Carissa and Mark in how they saw themselves—their heterosexual identities in the context of GLBT friends and family—in being able to become who they wanted to be.

Queer theorists argue that heteronormativity—that is, the normalcy, power and privilege given to heterosexuality—is dependent upon the maintenance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and on (re)creating difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals. The heterosexuals in my study, then, are telling a very queer story as they articulate their experiences with GLBT media. For example, Jackie, a 19 year old heterosexual woman said that,

I like finding characters I can relate to on television, it's a good outlet for me. Scary as this might be, the one character I feel best represents who I am is Andrew Van de Kamp from *Desperate Housewives*, who coincidentally is also an LGBT character. Everyone thought he was a total monster of a child, but I could see where he was coming from. Having faced that kind of rejection from his parents, his mother especially who told him she thought he was going to hell, it was understandable that he would want to retaliate, to protect his own self-esteem. I've been through the same thing and felt the same hostility toward my own parents.

The way that Jackie articulates using a media character—Andrew Van de Kamp—as an outlet, as a way to relate and subsequently normalize her own experiences, and understand her own experiences and sense of self—is evidence of a queer shift. That is, her ability to relate to the character is not dependent on sexual identity. The difference in sexual identities—her heterosexuality, the character's homosexuality—is not used to presume a lack of relatability, instead, quite the opposite. She sees her heterosexuality, his homosexuality, she does not ignore it; instead, she shares her experience with the character in a way that highlights similarities between, without erasing the difference. Seidman (1997) explains the queer critique of the hetero/homo binary:

...their object of analysis is linguistic or discursive structures, and, in principle, their institutional settings. Specifically, their object of analysis is the hetero/homosexual opposition. This is understood as a category of

knowledge, a way of defining and organizing selves, desires, behaviors, and social relations. Through the articulation of this hetero/homosexual figure in texts and social practices...it contributes to producing mutually exclusive heterosexualized and homosexualized subjects and social worlds (150).

Jackie's interpretation of the media, and her usage of Andrew's character as a way to normalize her own experiences, illuminates a challenge to the hetero/homosexual opposition, as described by Seidman. Jackie does not see her heterosexuality, and Andrew's homosexuality, as "mutually exclusive," instead she sees their life histories and difficulties with their parents, as a connected story.

Other heterosexuals in my study talked about seeing GLBT media representations through a normalizing lens. For example, Lisa said that,

I do think it is very important that glbtq characters be represented on television and movies. For most of my life I don't think I gave gltb representations all that much thought. I was raised by liberal-minded parents, so I wasn't homophobic, but I just never saw any representations on TV at all. ...As liberal as I am, I admit that I used to feel a little uncomfortable seeing same-sex kissing, etc. But like many people, I saw *Brokeback Mountain*. Then I found a website that had all the episodes of the original *British Queer as Folk* and had a marathon. Showtime was airing *QaF* reruns and I watched them. And then I met Captain Jack Harkness on *Doctor Who*. Somewhere along the line I discovered that any initial strangeness I felt watching two people of the same sex kiss, etc., had disappeared. I believe that if from an early age people are exposed to glbtq stories/characters, it would seem "normal" to them.

While Mary said that,

I did seek out *ATWT* [*As The World Turns*] because I thought just maybe there was a soap that would do justice to a much-needed gay storyline. I think it's important for the same reason that I as a Black Jewish woman wants to see positive people like me on TV. A major emphasis on positive.

People need to realise that the GLBT community deserves our respect and that they're no different than us while being exposed to the GLBT culture. I hope I'm making sense. I'd like to change the channel one day and come upon a show where there is a Gay or Lesbian couple that are married and have kids. Like a regular Cosby's show.

These heterosexual women use the media as a way to tell a story of their commitment to normalizing homosexuality, and their role in this process as heterosexuals; they see the media as an important site of sexual politics. According to the stories that Lisa and Mary tell, with no GLBT representation, there is an increased possibility to take for granted our ideas about hetero and homosexuality, thus maintaining the ideology of difference and power. On the other hand, increased and positive representation opens up the range of what is considered normal; these heterosexual women relate this to both a positive sense of self, as well as general societal respect. According to these heterosexual women, television exposure gave them the time and the context to learn to be comfortable with new ideas and ways to live, as well as providing them with a shared language to explain their hopes for a more egalitarian society.

In addition, heterosexuals talk about GLBT media representations as important to reflecting their own life histories and experiences. Rather than assuming that gays and straights exist in "separate" worlds, and that GLBT media only impacts queer-identified people, the heterosexuals that I interviewed made clear that a gay or lesbian identity isn't necessary to seeing GLBT as an important component of the cultural landscape. For example, Lynette, whose mom is a lesbian, reflected the importance of seeing GLBT media as reflective of heterosexual's lives as well. She makes a critical comment regarding the invisibility of her experience as reflected in the media:

I cannot think of any shows/films/books which stand out to me. There is certainly no one telling "my" story. Perhaps it is not possible to relate completely one a character. I spend a lot of my time with gay men, was raised for the majority of my life by a lesbian. This is my story, and perhaps this is also someone else's, but I know it is not typical.

A persistent theme of my interviews, as expressed above by Lynette, is the desire to see some version of our lives reflected back to us in the media. The studies by Cooper (2003) and Bonds-Raack et. Al (2007), that aim to explore the extent to which heterosexuals respond positively or negatively to gay and lesbian media, seems to assume that gays and lesbians aren't a part of heterosexuals' everyday lives; that the only contact straight people have with queer people is mediated contact. Lynette's comments make clear that this is not the case, that heterosexuals desires to see GLBT media stories isn't just because of lofty liberal ideologies, but is grounded in their life experiences. Holly, a heterosexual, though fluid, woman agrees that straights have a grounded interest in seeing the realities of their lives in the media:

I have HATED every movie I have seen dealing with the gay male/straight woman relationship. I guess I can only think of two off hand, The Next Best Thing and The Object of My Affection. I am sure there are others but these are the two first which come to mind. I even read a book once called Straight Women, Gay Men or something like that and hated it. The message they both seemed to send to me is that straight women need gay men in their life until they find a husband/boyfriend/partner. I survive with both. My friends are not a substitute for my boyfriend. Just like I don't think I am a substitute for their boyfriend(s). All of us have had men come into our lives and we have stayed friends, usually bringing the boyfriend into our circle for as long as the relationship lasts.

For Holly, representations don't coincide with her life experiences, as a straight woman with many gay male friends. Holly is offended by these (mis)representations. The way



that she describes her hatred indicates that she feels limited by them—like they are telling her what is possible, but she knows from her life experiences that more is possible. These representations—these stereotypes—become a way for her to talk about what is really possible in a queer way that allows for both/and, rather than a dichotomous either/or.

James Dean (2006) argues that gay and lesbian visibility is forcing changes in the social construction of heterosexuality. More specifically, he argues that masculine heterosexuality, which has historically relied upon homophobia as an integral component of “doing gender,” has been forced to reconsider this dynamic. He writes that, “as gay men and lesbians have become more visible and tolerated, it’s become less acceptable to engage in openly homophobic behavior. So, some men rely less on homophobic behavior to convey being straight” (137). While Dean centralizes gay visibility in his discussion, there is no specific attention to the media’s role in this visibility. It is easily argued that it is not just gay and lesbian audiences that are impacted by gay and lesbian media representations.

Normative heterosexuality relies upon its own invisibility; so long as heterosexuality operates as a taken-for-granted, the material conditions of inequality produced as a result remain unexamined. However, as gay and lesbian visibility has increased, scholars note, so has attention to heterosexuality. As a result, normative heterosexuality is on shaky ground. As Sasha Roseneil (2000) argues, we are witnessing “queer transformations” in both the media and everyday life. Organizing social life around the heterosexual-as-normal has been maintained in a myriad of ways, operating

dialectically at the individual and structural levels of society. Media representations are argued to normalize heterosexuality through various discursive tactics. Chrys Ingraham (1999) argues that the strong reliance on white weddings in media texts perpetuate the “heterosexual imaginary,” which operates by romanticizing heterosexuality so as to mask the material and social conditions of inequality which the institution of heterosexuality perpetuates. Epstein and Steinberg (1996) argue that the therapeutic discourse of The Oprah Winfrey Show forces conversations about heterosexuality to remain at the micro level, where “problems are typically posed as individual pathologies subject to individual solutions. ...within this context, the self and family are seen as the world and this has the effect of erasing both power relations and social context” (92). These textual analyses bring with them the assumption that audiences will read the media in hegemonically supportive ways; thus, it has been argued that media representations have played an important role in maintaining “compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980).

As previously stated, many scholars have argued that gay and lesbian media representations have played a crucial—and ironic—role in the perpetuation of a normalized and naturalized, and thus privileged, heterosexuality. For example, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (1996) argues that media representations of lesbian sexuality might serve a voyeuristic opportunity to maintain a masculine heterosexuality that objectifies women-on-women love scenes; that is, lesbian media representation still serves to maintain the patriarchal male gaze. Many viewers of *The L Word* have mirrored these sentiments in their on-line discussions of the show. As one poster writes, “Shane

having sex with the lover girl...was a bit like straight porn.” Holly shared a similar sentiment in our email interview:

Lesbian storylines are even less than those with gay men and most of the time they are belittling or too pandering to straight male audiences, so if they aren't it is really refreshing to see a tv show that is dominated and aimed at women. Where the women are not just in correlation to the men. There are shows with gay themes that I didn't like as Will & Grace, QaF US, The L Word and Ally McBeal for example. In the first two I didn't find the lead man attractive for one. And W&G was a half-baked solution, a kind of alibi gay show. I loved the UK version of QaF and so didn't even try too get into the show after seeing the guy who played Brain Kinney. I gave up on The L word after the first episode so I probably couldn't even form an opinion, but the Jenny character irritated me too much.

For Holly, (mis)representations give her a space from which to articulate her views on sexuality—queer sexuality in particular—and to illustrate and argue her frustrations with a culture that limiting hers, and others, negotiations around sexuality in their everyday lives. In my conversations with heterosexual-identified and hetero-leaning men and women, I observed a pointed queering of heterosexuality; that is, heterosexuals themselves are living their lives in such a way so as to problematize normative heterosexuality.

As Gammon and Isgro (2006) point out, “heteronormativity and heterosexuality cannot be reduced to each other” (178). It became immediately evident that the heterosexual women I interviewed for this study had very fluid ideas of their own heterosexuality. Many of the women allowed for potential shifts in their sexualities, and realized that their heterosexuality was not necessarily permanent. Hopes for greater acceptance of gays and lesbians in society has centered around an assumption that straight people would open their minds to become more accepting and welcoming of gays

and lesbians; that change centered around straights allowing room in the world for gays. What we learn from the women in this study, however, is that change has gone much deeper; these women are not just accepting of gays and lesbians, but they are internalizing this change much more profoundly. One woman said that, "I'd define myself as straight, although I've never been that sexually active. I've wondered how I knew I was straight, but I've concluded that I just would have known if I wasn't. I don't necessarily think sexuality is as simple as gay/straight/bi, however. Life could still surprise me, I suppose." Here we see a woman reflecting on her own heterosexuality. She does not see her heterosexuality as permanent; she has questioned her own heterosexuality in ways that we usually attribute to gay and lesbian coming out processes. Lynette told a similar story in our interview:

I did feel like I had to hide my sexuality when I joined the band. This seems so strange and backwards to say. I was young and didn't want to be kicked out for being interested in men. Eventually I "came out" and it was fine. I hate to say I am straight though. The majority of my interest is in men, but I have had relationships with women, and would not rule it out in the future. I hate the term bisexual as well, so I don't use it. ...I definitely don't know a lot of people who see sexuality on a continuum. Well, in my friends in Arizona did. My boyfriend all through high school admitted interest in men and acted on it a few times. Many of my girlfriends there were the same way. Obviously my mom was the same way so I never thought much of it. Perhaps that is the difference. Now, I know very few people who would admit to anything other than straight or gay.

Diane Richardson (1996) writes that "heterosexuality is institutionalized as a particular form of practice and relationships, of family structure, and identity. It is constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category..." (2). Furthermore, this stability is what maintains the privileges associated with heterosexuality as an institution. Thus, women

such as Lynette (quoted above) are disrupting the institution and the privilege as they articulate and understand their heterosexuality in destabilized terms.

Some women utilize more contradictory language as they describe their sexualities. For instance, Betty said that, “I consider myself to be heterosexual with a little bi-curiosity thrown in.... What I mean by bi-curiosity is that while I can see myself being with another female in my mind, I have never been attracted to another female in real life. The act that makes lesbians lesbian, I am not really into.” Betty’s understanding of her own sexuality relies on both a flexible (hetero)sexual identity, as she allows for “a little bi-curiosity thrown in,” even as she frames lesbian sex in somewhat negative terms. Clearly then, such identity negotiations—and institutionalized heterosexuality along with these identity negotiations—are continually re-defined and contested. As Gamson (1998) writes of media representations, we must move beyond understanding in terms of positive or negative, but we must see things in terms of political negotiations. These heterosexual women are engaged in such political negotiations as they describe and articulate their sexual identities as fluid and unstable, while at times reaffirming the “normality” of heterosexuality, as Betty does.

What each of these women have in common is their relationships with queers in their everyday lives as well as their media consumption. These women discussed some of the ways that media consumption has shaped their sexual consciousness; that is, becoming more open to and aware of gay and lesbian issues both via the media and personal relationships has created a self-awareness of their own (hetero)sexualities. For example, Holly said that,

I haven't incorporated that [male/male sex] somehow into my sex life yet, but I wouldn't rule it out for the future. Same goes for attraction to women. I identify as heterosexual, but find sometimes find a woman on tv or in real life appealing sexually and maybe one day if it's the right moment and person for me I'd go further.

Holly's sister is bisexual, and considers her sister's ex-girlfriend to be one of her good friends. Thus, Holly's exposure to gays and lesbians is grounded in her everyday life. At the same time, her own attraction to women is often realized via her television watching. Thus, as she continues to define herself as heterosexual, she keeps the door open for non-heterosexual experiences. The interaction of her media consumption with her everyday life experiences allows her to reflect on, and consciously construct her (hetero)sexuality; rather than understanding her heterosexuality as something permanent, she experiences it as a constant negotiation.

Maggie told a similar story of hetero-reflexivity in the context of the queer community:

Being straight in a community of queer friends is difficult to describe, largely because since high school it just always happened that my closest friends identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. So it's sort of like I don't really remember what it was like to NOT have queer friends. And I don't know that I am COMPLETELY HETERO. You know? Like, I'm not going to go out and test that or anything, because I am in a serious, committed, long-term relationship with a person who just happens to be a dude, but I don't think I could ever check the "interested in" box that facebook offers on profiles.

Her heterosexuality is permanent in so far as she's in a committed relationship with a man; her commitment then is more to her male partner than it is to her heterosexual identity. The on-line profile boxes that she refers to are reflective of fixed, dichotomous

understandings of sexuality. That is, they offer the possibility to check one box only. So, even as they allow non-heterosexual categories, they do not have options that are representative of fluid identities, thus Maggie's unwillingness to check any box.

There is some scholarly attention to the issue of voyeurism as it pertains to queer media. This is especially true of shows such as *The L Word*, where scholars argue that the show is meant as much for the lesbian community as it is to titillate heterosexual men. Others argue (Sender 1996) that gay and lesbian themes in media texts serve the purpose of allowing the straight audience to feel better about themselves, to participate in a "liberal" acceptance of queers, while being able to maintain a straight-only existence. For the heterosexuals in this study, this voyeurism was unrealized. I argue that this is not a story of straights "watching" queers; rather, this is straights watching queers then looking back onto themselves. Thus, instead of a straight media audience watching gay and lesbian media texts, concluding the experience by making assumptions and suppositions about gays and lesbians, the straight individuals in this study just as frequently used their media experiences as a way to reflect back on their own lives, and their own heterosexualities.

For the women included above, this meant engaging with their heterosexualities in queer ways; allowing for a fluid understanding of their identities. For others in my study (including all the heterosexual men), they talked about their heterosexual identity in more stable, essential ways. One man referred to himself as "biologically straight but televisationally gay," which he argued was because his television interests strayed from the typical expectations of straight (read hegemonically masculine) men. Even in these

cases, however, the heterosexuals in this study gave indications that they had actively thought about their heterosexual identity, and did not take their heterosexuality for granted. Jackie argued that her politics made her feel more certain about her heterosexuality:

I'm straight. I've always been awkward about the whole romance subject (my first crush hit me at age 14), but so far any deeper feelings I've had have always been toward guys. I feel like if I were anything other than straight, I'd have known by now and, LGBT rights advocate and ally that I am, I definitely wouldn't have been afraid to show it!

And, importantly, that being a gay rights activist was an integral component of her heterosexual identity; that is, she has come to a place where she can't separate her queer activism from her heterosexual identity. This is a queer notion indeed, if heterosexual identities are being constructed around queer activism.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### MEDIATED INTERACTIONS, INTERACTING QUEERLY

#### Introduction

Sociologists of sexualities argue that sexuality, like gender, is a socially constructed phenomenon that both structures interactions, and is an outcome of interactions (Pascoe 2006, Schippers 2002, West and Zimmerman 1987). For example, according to Pascoe, “the fag discourse” is used by boys in group interactions as a tool for constructing their own—and repudiating others’—masculinity. The interactional context is the key site where this gendered homophobia operates (Pascoe 2007). Schippers (2002) tells a story of the complex ways that participants in an alternative hard rock scene in Chicago use their sexualities as resources in engaging gender resistance, in the context of their interactions in a historically sexist location (rock music clubs). In both of these examples, sexualities are not stable, but highly contested, dependent upon constant reworking and negotiating various interactional contexts.

William Gamson et al (1992) write that “reading media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings. Furthermore, it is frequently interactive, taking place in conversation with other readers who may see different meanings” (375). Taking this interactive process

seriously, in this chapter, I will tell a story of how the media is used as a resource in negotiating interactions around sexual identity. It is my goal to further illustrate ways that sexualities are changing and fluid; not just an individual's sexual identity (as discussed in Chapter 3), but in the ways those identities are used, and interpreted, in social interactions. In addition, this chapter will provide an in depth analysis not of free floating media texts<sup>2</sup>, but will illustrate how media texts are taken up by audiences as interactional resources, facilitating conversations around sexuality, and specifically, gay and lesbian sexualities.

James Lull (1990), Ron Lembo (2000), and S. Elizabeth Bird (2003) have all explored the complex ways that media structures everyday life experiences, particularly how television has come to structure family time. For example, Lull (1990) argues that his research documents that “television was found to be useful to family members for purposes which range from structuring daily activities and talk patterns to far more subtle and involved tasks such as conflict reduction, the reinforcement of family roles, and intellectual validation as a means for dominating another family member” (51). My critique of this work shows that it assumes a Standard North American Family (Smith 1993) structure. As a result, sexuality remains invisible as a conceptualizing framework, as well as remaining untouched as grounds for empirical analysis. In addition, the assumptions around exploring “family viewing,” which were likely sound when Lull was doing his research (his ethnography was published in 1990), assume that TV

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter One for an extensive review of the sociological implications of textual analyses.

consumption happens at home. Of course, technological and social contexts have also changed our patterns of consumption and interactions, limiting the ability to make assumptions about where or with whom media watching takes place. For example, May's (1999) ethnographic work on tavern culture engages beyond this heteronormative assumption by exploring how television shapes the interactions between regular patrons of a neighborhood bar in Chicago. May also makes it clear the ways that individuals' gender and sexual ideologies shape these interactions.

The GLBT community, similar to the heterosexual families that have received most of the scholarly attention, structures its everyday lives and interactions around the media as well. As Monte (white, gay, male, 37) said,

Socially, we just enjoy our couple, our gay couple friends. And we like to go to their house, or have them come to our house. And we cook dinner and we watch movies. Or play cards. We travel together. We like to go to the movies, we go to a lot of movies. Go camping. Whatever, whatever we can do. But it's not really centered around the bars. I would say I live a pretty heterosexual life. Mind you, I have heterosexual friends, but they're not people I necessarily hang out with....the people that I hang out with 95% of them are gay friends. And it's going to their house parties or to their, whether a party they're having at their house, or just to hang out and watch TV and gossip. Whatever. Or we're home, doing things together at home. We have a very normal life that way.

Monte's understanding of sociality revolves around spending time with other gay couple friends. This time, as he describes it, is centered around movies, TV, games, and travel. The media is used by Monte, his partner, and his friends, as a way to structure their social time together. And oft made assumption about gay men is that their life revolves around the bar scene—a stereotype some gay men in my study associate with *Queer as Folk*, a

Showtime drama, now off the air—and Monte makes it a point to set himself at a distance from this stereotype. He accomplishes this by saying that he lives “a pretty heterosexual life” and “a very normal life.” Not only does Monte use the media to structure his sociality, he also uses it as a way to mark his own normality, even as he equates normality with heterosexuality. David Morgan (2004) argues “these life events and routine practices together provide the basis for defining normality. The regularities not only come to define what human life as a whole is about or individuals’ shifting identities as members of families and households, but also a collective sense of ‘people like us’” (42). Monte is using his everyday life practices of watching television and going to the movies with his friends as a way of defining his own normality against the stereotype of gay men who spend all their time in bars. Read through a queer lens, this is an example of the ways in which gays and lesbians understand their own experiences through a heteronormative framework.

It is my argument that media provide an important structure for organizing everyday life, in planning and negotiating our interactions with others. This chapter will highlight this process, in addition to keeping central the role that sexuality plays in these same negotiations. The analysis of this chapter will sit at the intersection of media in everyday life and sexuality in everyday life, exploring the ways that media facilitates organizing sexual communities and is used by audience to help establish meaningful relationships across sexual difference. I will provide examples to the ways that my interview participants use the media to build relationships and communities, to establish bonding rituals, to negotiate homophobia, and to both contemplate and engage in

activism. This chapter provides further insight into the complex relationship between media and everyday life; going beyond an analysis of how our time is structured to explore how the media becomes embedded into our interactions, our intimate relationships, our community involvement, and our activism.

### **Building Relationships, Building Communities**

Henry Jenkins, a long-time audience researcher, documented criticism of audience researchers “for their preoccupation with fans’ meaning production at the expense of consideration of their affective investments and emotional alliances” (2006:139). He fills this gap by writing about on-line fan communities, and the social dynamics involved, including but not limited to fans’ responses to specific texts. He argues that “we should document the interactions that occur among media consumers” as well as those interactions between media audiences and media texts (2006:135). Similarly, Gerry Bloustien’s (2007) ethnographic research on youth culture illuminates the role of media in community building. He argues that,

...young people’s use of convergent media forms—music, mobile phones, blogging, websites, the Internet, desktop publishing, digital cameras—which relies on ‘serious play’ (Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1982; Schechner, 1993), brings to the fore new forms of agency, networking, collaboration and trust; aspects that make the risky creation and representation of the self, and a sense of belonging in a shifting world, seem more manageable and worthwhile (450).

Like many of the participants in my study, the young people in Bloustien’s study relied upon a shared language of media to construct “a sense of belonging in a shifting world.” They were able to simultaneously accomplish a sense of individualism (identity, see

Chapter 3) through their own work in music, as well as use their music to connect with others. After speaking with media audiences across various contexts—in one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and in on-line fan forums—I heard many stories of how these individuals rely upon the media in maneuvering their relationships, be it with parents, siblings, partners, or friends. The media, based on the descriptions of my research participants, is an important social tool.

Reese, a 31 year old gay male, who recently moved away from his group of friends to work for his family's business said that,

My gosh, I am a pretty big media whore. There seem to be very few things that i don't watch! Even at work I have been finding time to re-watch both Reaper and Gossip Girl. I recently (in the last year) moved away from all of my friends in Portland, Oregon, to help out my family's business in Bend, Oregon. My friends and I used to get together every night at a different house to watch whatever was on that night. We have been able to kind of keep up that tradition, with me joining them via windows live messenger or iChat. For me, I love the social aspect of my group getting together and discussing the shows we love.

When he lived in the same community as his friends, they used television watching as a way to structure their sociality; their time together, as well as their conversations and debates, was organized around television. This is so important to him, he qualifies it with the word “love.” Since his move, he is able to use new technologies to stay connected with these same friends, and to continue their social ritual of interacting by watching and discussing their favorite shows. This TV watching ritual, aided with technological advances such as webcams, transforms what could be an isolated experience—watching TV alone and away from his friends—into a social one that is not bound by geography,

but that is dependent upon building strong interpersonal ties through ritualized television talking.

Lynette, a heterosexual woman, told me a similar story:

Media is definitely integrated into my friendships. There was a time when a small group of friends would gather at one of our apartments every Thursday to watch *Friends* and *Will & Grace*. We had numerous *Sex and the City* parties. We had a party for the last episode of *Six Feet Under*. A friend and I would call each other during the *Grey's Anatomy* commercial breaks to discuss what had happened. Even during *Out & Proud* a few weeks ago Rob and I were texting during about the people we knew and our reaction to certain segments. We do the same thing when certain movies come out - *Sex and the City*, *Hairspray*, *Dreamgirls*. We had a "school lunch party" when *Hairspray* came out on video. A friend made all of the things from when he was in school, corndogs, tater tots, etc., and we had cocktails and watched the movie. Before I turned 21, I would sneak into the backdoor of *Big Chick's* to watch *Queer as Folk*. It started right after concert band practice was over so many of the members of the band would go there. The bar was only about a block from the practice space on Lawrence. For me, this only lasted about 3-4 weeks - until I was carded. One of my best friends and I constantly perform the Phoebe dance after a few cocktails because we think it is funny (from the episode when she is trying to seduce Chandler). We have integrated the vernacular of shows into every day conversation. When a friend of mine goes on a cleaning spree we call him Monica (from *Friends*). When I went through a particularly promiscuous period in my life friends were calling me Samantha (*Sex and the City*). This is also the case for certain code words we use. When we see someone we think is attractive we would say "hello tony." This is from the movie *Drop Dead Gorgeous*. This phrase replaced the previous one we used which was "meanwhile," from the movie *Broken Hearts Club*.

As Lynette describes her experience, the media is used as a starting point, or a focal point of spending quality time with her friends. It provides a structure for planned interactions. From there, it clearly transforms over time into a way to bond through integrating personal stories with media stories. Watching *Queer as Folk* with her friends from band was so important her it was worth sneaking into a bar underage. This group had

established solid social rituals around television watching—watching parties organized around specific shows, *Queer as Folk* after band practice, commercial break discussions about plotlines—social rituals that strengthened their social bonds. In Lynette’s experience, the media was also used as a tool for developing an intimate language with in-the-know friends. That their mediated language depended on insider status and knowledge created a unique bond between her and her friends, one that strengthens their shared intimacy.

Kasey’s experience indicated the role that a television show played in making the gay community visible, and how watching the show led to his establishing new friendships after the break-up of a long term relationship. In his words,

Well, it was kind of in two ways because it became kind of a bonding experience with a gay couple friend that I had when I lived down in Champaign, and they would invite me over to their house to watch this. And it was also at the same time that I was single. And so after an 18 year relationship, and I felt that this relationship kept me you know, almost bottled up, of this world that I wasn’t allowed to participate in. And so for me it was like, it was release, but also at the same time it was creating bonds with gay friends that I hadn’t had before. Just going over and having this event that we could share together um, and talk about and kind of joke about and draw correlations to our own lives and I hadn’t had the freedom of those kinds of discussions before. I think gay as folk gay. as [pause] [laughs] queer as folk was kind of that way for me too, it was kind of a unique situation because I was kind of forging friendships at the same time as well.

*Queer as Folk* served as the context through which Kasey shifted gears, from being in a long-term closeted relationship, to being single and exploring gay social life. As he describes it, being single after such a long-term relationship can be difficult and meeting new people can be scary. Getting together with a group of people, who became his



friends over time, created a safe space for him to explore the gay community, an exploration that happened both through the text of the show, as well as through his interactions and conversations with the men whom he watched the show with, as they would gossip, joke, and draw correlations to their own lives. It was a starting point for conversations, and a shared experience that constructed a solid grounding for more intimate sociality.

Douglas Kellner (1995) articulates an understanding of media scholarship that is predominant in cultural studies: “media culture itself provides resources which individuals can appropriate, or reject, in forming their own identities against dominant models. Media culture thus induces individuals to conform to established organization of society, but it also provides resources that can empower individuals against society” (3). This articulation of media culture centers on negotiating power dynamics—dominant messages encoded into media texts and audiences decoding those dominant messages to construct dominant or alternative identities. As evidenced in Chapter 3, the people that I interviewed do in fact use the media as a resource in constructing their sexual identities, and in resisting relying on dominant frameworks. Ending the conversation here, however, falls short of a sociological analysis of media. Kellner’s framework situates micro level individuals in negotiation with macro level powers. My interview data suggests another framework to see media culture—as a primary resource in micro level interactions and relationship building. As Maggie, a heterosexual woman in her 20’s put it,

Well, I’d been meaning to watch it for a while... QAF [Queer as Folk] so I watched those all in a row. And then I was like, now what? And like, I

heard people arguing over which one was better, *The L Word* or *Queer as Folk*. And I'm like, oh, OK. SO, then this opportunity came up to watch it with my friends. And I kept watching it because it meant hanging out with my friends and it meant watching another TV show that was... amusing...it's like so unrealistic but then there's this whole pretense that it's something new so you have to watch it.

Maggie was intrigued by the debate between the two shows—one centered around the lives of gay men, the other on lesbians—and wanted to enter the (textual) conversation about them. Once she started watching the show with friends, her reasons to stay committed to the show in part shifted towards the friendships and away from textual dialogues. The way that my interviewees discuss the integration of media into their social lives makes clear that audiences don't just negotiate between the powers that be (the text) and themselves; they also negotiate amongst themselves. In these stories, audience members are focused less on the social power of heterosexuals, and the social oppression of homosexuals, and are more focused on finding enjoyable and long lasting ways to engage with their straight, gay and lesbian friends and family.

There are also ways that GLBT media representations have had an impact on heterosexuals interacting with their partners. For example, an on-line discussion participant told the following story: "There's a straight married couple I know, who, after watching *The L Word*, began a very important dialogue about their \*own\* sex life; a conversation that they had been avoiding for a long time, and has proved to be very important to their relationship." According to her, her friends were able to use a television show as a diving board into conversations about their own relationship, in a way that has benefited them. Media texts are used in relationships in many different

ways that allow individuals, couples and friends to explore new ideas and new ways to relate to each other. Negotiating their sexual lives in a mediated context allows an opening up of new space through which to explore our sexual interactions.

*Building Relationships Across Sexual Difference*

Terry, a 22 year old woman said in our interview that she'd like her T.V.

...to not be afraid, I think too, to not just stick to the norm or to what people aren't afraid to see. I like when a show is able to show people because people come in all different forms and people are gay and people are straight and they should all be friends together on tv as they are in real life you know, like, I just want it to be more represented of the world in general.

Anna Muraco (2006) writes that there are two significant findings from her research of fictive kin ties between friends, across sexual orientation. She argues that, "(a) these close friendships illustrate how chosen family connections exist not only for gay men and lesbians but also for straight people and (b) such friendships are both normative and transformative not only with respect to family structures but also in terms of gender and sexual privilege" (1320). She goes on to argue that her work on cross-orientation kinship patterns is important "because the mutual nature of gay men and lesbians in straight people's networks has heretofore gone unacknowledged" (Muraco 1320). Continuing my discussion of the ways that media audiences use the media as a tool in building relationships, I will focus on the stories from my participants that illuminate relationship building across sexual orientation, and the primacy of these interactions for both gays,

lesbians, and heterosexuals. Media scholars have begun to explore the complex ways that media representations of GLBT people have begun to shape the lives of gays and lesbians. For example, Susan Driver's (2007) ethnography of young girls and queer media makes clear how important media, such as the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and music artist Ani DiFranco, are for these girls and their negotiations with being both adolescent and queer. Kathleen Farrell (2006) interviews college-aged gay men and argues the importance of the media story of a relationship between an HIV positive gay man, and his non-positive boyfriend (on *Queer as Folk*), for the safe sex, sexual education of the audience of gay men watching. These studies are about gay and lesbian audiences watching, reacting to, and using gay and lesbian media. Even fewer in numbers is research on heterosexual audiences responses to GLBT media representations (see Chapters 1 and 3 for further discussion of this issue).

Watching and talking about queer media becomes an impetus for interactions and conversations among mixed groups of gays and straights, thus facilitating a dialogue across sexual identities. Jackie, a heterosexual woman, says that "I only discussed the shows with my gay and lesbian friends," while Maggie, a woman in a heterosexual relationship, said "I guess you could say that it's helped me build stronger relationships with my [gay and lesbian] friends, but more because it's something in common that we enjoy, so enjoying it together is just another reason to hang out." So, while textual analyses inform us of the problematic stereotypes embedded within gay and lesbian media texts, audiences consume these stories in the context of interaction, which increases the potential for critical readings.

Perhaps more importantly, media texts serve as a basis for relationship building between gay and straight friends, facilitating a mutual dialogue as well as securing gay and lesbian visibility in the realm of everyday life. This intersection of media and everyday life is important in how the two work through interaction. As Entman and Rojecki (2001) argue that whites who lack black co-workers and friends, who have little to no interaction with blacks in their lives, are more likely to rely upon media stereotypes as reflective of reality. This theory—cultivation theory—was developed by Gerbner and argued that “common conceptions of reality are cultivated by the overall pattern of programming to which communities are exposed regularly over a long period of time (Nabi & Sullivan 2001:803). Following this logic, we could surmise that straight individuals without direct contact with gay and lesbians would also come to use media texts as examples of real life.

In fact, in interviews and discussion board conversations happening on-line, it becomes evident that gays and lesbians in particular are concerned of exactly this phenomenon. For example, posters in an on-line discussion<sup>3</sup> of *The L Word* make it clear their concern of how straight audiences will read the show. One on-line participant in this conversation writes that, “this show is not a valid representation of who we are. It makes me shudder at how many straight people are further turned off by the show and lesbians in general after watching” (L), while another writes that, “even though I still am glad that some of the very real “L” issues are being examined in the show, I still fear that the storylines may contradict themselves, giving straight viewers more ‘proof’ that being

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<sup>3</sup> From a discussion posted on planetout.com, that originated as letters to the editor of *The Advocate*.

gay and lesbian is a choice (lifestyle).” In response to such statements, another contributor to the conversation writes that “all of you ladies judging the show, saying it isn’t a realistic look at lesbian life, need to be thankful that there is even a group of women doing something at all to help us all in gaining equal rights and acceptance.” Both sets of comments—those that see the show more positively versus more negatively—indicate the audiences firm commitment to an understanding of media texts as having very real material implications. One thing that my interviews made clear is that it is problematic to dichotomize audiences into separate orientation categories, as if they don’t co-exist and interact in everyday life. My research participants told very clear stories of the ways that their experiences with media were situated within a relational context. More so, their relationships exist both within, and across sexual difference, something that is both a consequence of their media consumption, as well as a function of it.

Many of the gay and lesbian women that I interviewed shared how the media was useful in creating a safe terrain with which to interact with their heterosexual friends and family. For example, Kasey told me that he purchased a copy of the book written by Ellen DeGeneres’ mom, and that he planned to give to his mom when he came out. He felt that Betty DeGeneres’ book would be helpful for his mom, though at the same time, having the book as a tool made Kasey feel more comfortable with his approach in telling his mom he is gay. The book became a pivotal component of his coming out story, and was a point of comfort for him in the context of a potentially uncomfortable situation (coming out). In this example, it is not simply the text that is important, it is the way

Kasey uses the text that allows us to see more complexly how media audiences interact with and use media texts. Kasey also shared with me how he used media conversations to stay connected with a heterosexual friend who lives out of state. In his words,

You know the conversations I have had um especially with the reality series characters um real life characters I would talk mostly with one of my best friends she lives in Denver and we talk through email. She's straight she has kids she's got the whole family thing that she's one of the most, she's a wonderful all around person. And we talk about the gay characters especially like in project runway and um, it is interesting to see her take on characters and my take as being a gay man. And I'll say, 'as a gay man I find this person is actually rather embarrassing' and she'll bring about different aspects, and a lot of times we agree because we kind of see people the same way.

He uses talking about reality television as a conversation point in keeping in touch with his friend; more specifically, he is able to articulate to her his perspective of gay characters as a gay identified man, which he hopes will help her contextualize media stereotypes within the perspective of everyday life. Further, they share their ideas, which allows both to see different perspectives, and also to see how their different sexual identities doesn't keep them from seeing the world in similar ways.

Tina, a young white woman in her 20's discussed the ways that she has used media stories in her interactions with her family members:

When I was coming out to my dad one of the questions he ask was how I had figured it out. I told him how Buffy was my wake up call. I think that it put the conversation on ground that was easy for us to navigate. For the first time he told me that he really wanted to watch the show because it had played such an important role for me. For my friends I didn't use any media references. They don't watch TV like I do so most of my references would go over their heads. ...Even though I am not out to my brother yet, I am sure that he already knows I am gay. We just haven't had an actual conversation yet. I am not at all afraid to tell him, I just have not had the

chance. One of the reasons I am not afraid is his reaction to gay media. When I came home from school he was really excited to show me episodes of the tv show "Reaper" that had a gay couple. He watched Six Feet Under without a second thought the the major gay story lines. The last time we watched Buffy together he commented about how I was in love with Tara. All of these experiences put me at ease because he seems so comfortable with gay characters and gay relationship portrayed on TV and in movies. (Also with real gay people, because Neil Patrick Harris is one of his favorite actors). The reason I have not told him yet about my own "gayness" is because of my mother. She has shown less positive reactions to gay media which makes me nervous. I don't want him to have to keep secrets from her.

Tina discusses *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Reaper*, and *Six Feet Under* as tools to gauge her family's response to her non-heterosexual identity. In her conversations with her father, Buffy feels to her a safe context to discuss such a difficult issue. It also became a way for him to reach back out to her, through his expressed interest in watching the show. It became a comfortable resource upon which they could both build their interactions around the issue of sexuality. With her friends, she feels safe enough that the media references aren't as useful, but with her dad, even though he wouldn't understand the references, it allowed her to engage with him on comfortable turf. She also uses her brother and mother's responses to media stories about GLBT as practical everyday life information; she trusts their responses to media texts as useful information in gauging their own (potential) responses to her sexual orientation. Tina uses her family's reactions to media texts as a way to assess their probable comfort level with her sexual identity; media stories become resources for her in navigating her relationships with family members who are all coming from different places. Instead of approaching each relationship assuming they will all react the same, she has gained insight into differences



in her family members' ideas on same-sex sexuality. In her words, this process helped her father become more comfortable with her, and it has made her more comfortable with her brother. It also has caused her to be more cautious regarding her mother. All this information was gained through her incorporation of media texts into her interactions with her family. Francis, an afterellen participant told the following story of an experience watching television with her brother:

I was watching True Life: I'm bisexual with my little brother and I was happy on how my brother took the lives of the young people without negative judgment. He saw first hand the ups and down of being bisexual and wasn't "grossed out" by the person who identified as a bisexual male. He was confused about one girl who must have both in her life in order to be truly happy. I told him that issue is more about her being polyamorous than bisexual; how being bisexual why NOT have both male and female partners. My brother in general is a good kid just has his dumb moments. He admitted that the show taught him a lot about people who are in general not straight. He knows I'm gay, as long as I make him cookies he's happy!

The television show became a context for her and her brother to have a conversation about sexuality, and her sexual orientation specifically, where the show created a safe space for the conversation. She was also able to use his reaction to the show, and the bisexual people on the show, as a way to make sense of her brothers' abilities to be non-judgemental. Furthermore, they were able to have this conversation about her sexuality without actually discussing her sex life—they used the person in the show as the vehicle through which to have a fruitful interaction.

Guy shared a similar story about using news media stories as a way to engage in important conversations with his mom; conversations that were about the news, but were

used as connecting points back to his own sexual identity, and how this impacts his relationship with his mom. In his words,

I do with my mom as I try and take every opportunity to remind her that I am gay as I've been told that most straight people need us to keep the topic in the forefront as most of them see even less gay images than we do, and when they do they are generally sensationalistic, sad, or politicized. A recent example of my using the media to talk about sexual orientation was during an episode of a series called Intervention on A&E. The subject happened to be a lesbian so on top of the usual baggage that the addicts have (generally sexual abuse, lack of structure, and possibly genetic components) there was her family's rejection of her sexual orientation. ... Watching this together provided an opportunity for dialogue that we would not have had if we'd not watched the show. But again remember, it dealt with a real person, not a character on a TV show. Mom will always struggle with preferring that I were straight, but my own determination to be respected with her allowing for this dialogue to take place when we see gays in the media will either help us be closer or keep me at a safe emotional distance that has been there since I came out a few years ago. She's gotten so much better and points out when she sees something positive in the media as she knows that I will see that she's trying.

Guy makes clear that after coming out to his mom, he feels the need to keep the topic open, to engage with her in order to grow and make sure he is accepted. The media is a safe context for him to push these boundaries with her; a language they can both relate to, even if they don't always agree about the subject matter. According to Guy, his mother has come to use the media as a way to indicate to her son that she is working towards greater acceptance. Her ability to say to her son, "look, I noticed this and this is how I feel about it," shows how those we are interacting with come to use to media as well. Guy is able to discuss issues with his mom, topics that wouldn't come up otherwise; media stories allow him to discuss issues without seeming too pushy while still allowing space for further discussion. To be clear, I would anticipate that this process would and

does happen without reliance on media stories; what stands out to me from the voices of my participants, however, is that media stories are experienced as making this process easier and more comfortable.

Other participants discussed more directly the ways that they use media texts as a tool in negotiating homophobia in their everyday lives. For example, they brought up media stories to gauge others' reactions, in attempts to determine the extent others' are homophobic and closed-minded regarding homosexuality. One woman described her experiences watching *The L Word* with her college roommates, and how their responses frustrated her, but also provided her insight into the extent she might be willing to be out with them (discussed more in Chapter 5). Rick told me during one of my focus groups that one day while traveling on the El he was reading a Red Eye article about gay male parenting, and heard a the male half of a heterosexual couple on the train begin to express his opinions of disgust regarding gay male parents, which made him monitor his own behavior more closely, so as to ensure his own safety.

So far I have illustrated ways that gays and lesbians use media stories to negotiate their interactions with heterosexuals—friends, family members, strangers. The media audience members that I interviewed clearly feel safe negotiating interactions across difference on the terrain of media stories. Media texts are important resources for these gays and lesbians; they use them as non-personal points of conversation, as gauge's to assess comfort levels, as a shared language, and as a way to assess potential homophobia. Amidst all that, my interviewees also made clear that through their mediated resource

negotiation, they were able to build—in most cases—stronger relationships with the heterosexuals in their lives.

The heterosexual women and men I interviewed also told stories of the ways they use the media in their interpersonal relationships with gays and lesbians. They also made clear that doing so helped create the grounds for strengthening existing relationships, as well as starting some new ones. Group media watching as organized, structured interactions emerged from their stories as important grounds for relationship building. For example, Christy, a heterosexual woman in her mid thirties, told the story of how she came to watch *The L Word* (a show about a group of lesbians in Los Angeles):

One of my roommates sister, um, I think she, she was gay, and she really loved the show and she would bring over the video tapes and it became kind of an, um, like a girls night. Yeah, like 90210 in high school where it was like a good time for all of us to like get together, drink, and I know, I've seen the, there's a documentary where they talk about, where they show women and how it's affected them, and that's exactly what we did. It became like this kind of group thing, and it was kind of like a bonding thing. ...God, we, at some times we had like 10 people watching at once. And it was always at least 3 or 4 of us. ..I think we had, we had men once In a while, gay men. Maybe just one or two. It was mostly girls. And it was people gay and straight. It was like a soap opera to me, and that's why I enjoyed it, anything with sex, and people sleeping around, it's like a soap opera. We watched the video tapes, yeah, we did, I don't think we paused it, I think we talked about it, of course, before and afterwards.

Christy described this time together with a group of mostly women, both lesbian and straight, as a bonding experience. She related her experience to that of other women reported about in a documentary, making clear that the experience affected her as well as her friends who organized the watching parties. The watching parties became important structured time for them to spend together, and watching and talking about the show

allowed them to connect with each other more profoundly. It also allowed a group of women across sexual orientation to talk about female sexuality in general, and lesbianism in particular, in a comfortable environment. In fact, as Christy describes it, it was the talking about the show before and after that led her to describe the experience as “a bonding thing.” That is, watching alone doesn’t bring the full impact; it is watching and talking about the show in a group context that creates the foundation for relationship building.

Lily’s experience was different from Christy’s. Lily didn’t watch *The L Word* with such a large group, and the watching was instigated by family, not by a friend of a friend. However, according to her description, important interpersonal connections were a part of the experience. As she said, “I started watching because of [my sister]. [My sister and her girlfriend] introduced me to it said it was a great series to, you know, get in to. I think it was the first series for me, and maybe there are others out there and maybe there aren’t, that was completely about a gay lifestyle.” Though she didn’t often watch the show with her sister, it still became a resource for her, a heterosexual woman, to reach out to and connect with her lesbian sister. Like the heterosexual parents mentioned previously, connecting to a gay or lesbian media story is one method my heterosexual participants relied upon to communicate that they are, like the pop culture bumper sticker, “straight-but-not-narrow”. Lily did share that she watched *The L Word* with her husband, and that it became something they enjoyed doing together: “So, I mean [my husband and I] I loved it. We watched it together from the beginning. Um, and it was just, usually it was just the two of us, and once in a while if it was the season finale, [my

sister and her girlfriend] would come over. But mostly it was just the two of us watching.”

Lynette said at one point during our interview that, “I know one’s feeling toward the GLBT community are the number one deal-breaker for me, be it with a friend or partner.” Lynette’s life as a heterosexual woman is not separate from the lives of gays and lesbians; she does not live side by side gays and lesbians, but builds relationships across difference, and requires the same of all the people in her life. The heterosexual individuals interviewed for this project told stories that indicate that their interpretations and reactions to gay and lesbian media content are contextualized within relationships with gays and lesbians in their everyday lives, and further, that their relationships with the GLBT community are important to their own (heterosexual) identities. As May (1999) writes, “viewers redefine television by using their own definitions to understand what they view” (70). That is, knowing gays and lesbians shapes how straights are consuming media content—both gay and straight media content.

To strengthen Dean’s (2006) point that gay visibility is affecting straight identities, the heterosexuals in this study allow us to see that this impact is coming from both media visibility as well as everyday life visibility. In fact, there is a reciprocal relationship here: straight individuals who share their everyday lives with gay and lesbian friends and family members are more critical media consumers, while at the same time, media consumption is used as a tool for straight individuals to connect with their gay and lesbian friends and family members. We can clearly see here how personal lives

affect media consumption, as well as how media consumption affects personal lives. For example, Barb, a 40 year old heterosexual woman from the Midwest said,

My older sister and aunt are lesbian, and I have an uncle in his sixties who is gay but still in the closet. He thinks that no one knows, but everyone does :) So I have been surrounded by the gay lifestyle all of my life. I thought that I was pretty open minded until a few years ago when I started watching shows like Queer as Folk and The L Word, not to mention programs on LOGO.

For Barb, her gay and lesbian family members allowed her to feel like an open minded heterosexual, and yet, watching television with queer content allowed her to see that she still had a lot to learn. Knowing gay people wasn't enough to make her more open minded. According to her timeline, however, knowing gay people created the space for her watching of queer media, which then in turn helped facilitate her becoming more open minded. This learning experience, however, allowed her to in turn relate more complexly with her gay and lesbian family members. Clearly then, media consumption and interpersonal relationships can be mutually reinforcing, and is a process that has implications for our everyday lives. Carissa also spoke frequently about her brother, who is gay, and how her relationship with him impacts her personally, as well as how it impacts her relationship with the media. Mark, a straight man who views sexuality through socio-biological lens, discussed how his personal sexual politics—of which he is fully supportive of a gay rights agenda—has been shaped by both his media exposure (where he referenced among other things, the show Dawson's Creek, which he watched as an adolescent) as well as his relationship with a close friend who is a lesbian.

In another example, Maggie stated that, “I definitely learn more from my friends than *The L Word*,” but then continued to say the following regarding her experiences watching the show,

I worry about, you know how lesbians are represented, and how gay men are represented on queer as folk because they are always just represented as dishonest not loyal promiscuous like, and that’s not how the majority of any people, like that’s not how it is. And so, that’s what I worry about more than about feeling uncomfortable or anything watching a show about lesbians. So there’s that.

Her discourse of the show is a rights-based discourse. She is concerned about the real world impact of representations. Her worry is contextualized within her own fluid heterosexual identity, but also within her relationships with gay and lesbian friends.

Holly, a woman who also expressed concern, said the following in an email interview:

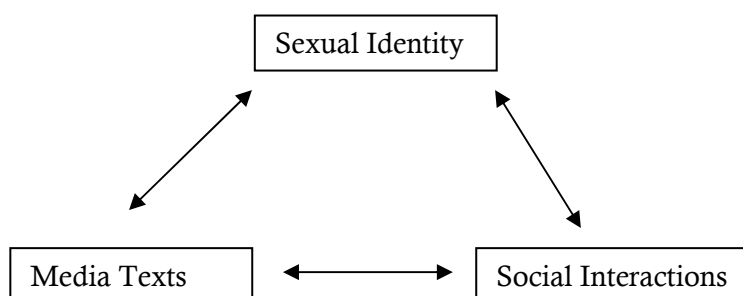
I would also hesitate to tell my gltb acquaintances about slash and all that, because maybe they'd be offended. Kind of like I'm trivializing something so fundamental to them. If you saw the movie *Sex and the City* there's a scene at the beginning where the girls walk along the street and see an attractive man. They look after him as he walks by and then kisses another man. The four turn back around and giggle. I thought that was a very stupid scene and was disappointed that so many people in the cinema found it funny. I don't want people who know me (gltb or straight) think I'm like that. ...

Holly’s story about seeing the *Sex and the City* Movie is a good place to illustrate (Figure A) how sexual identity filters how media is both interpreted, and how it is used in social interactions. Media texts, sexual identity, and social interactions are mutually reinforcing. Holly, a heterosexual woman who relies upon a queer political framework, reacts to the “giggling” scene as problematic, as something that trivializes gay sexuality. When others in the theater laughed and thought this funny, she interpreted their behavior



in much the same way she interpreted the text. Furthermore, she was concerned about what this might mean for her; she does not want her sexual identity—a heterosexual who is actively involved in promoting GLBT rights—to be misconstrued. She expresses concern over how her gay and straight friends will react to her media consumption, realizing the extent to which media texts and sexual identity impact our social interactions.

Figure A: Inter-relationship Between Interactions, Sexuality and Media



Watching queer media content combined with real-life relationships with gay and lesbians is a mutually reinforcing experience for the heterosexuals in this study. That is, it is the combination of the experience that facilitates the queering of heterosexuality—these straight individuals do not operate under the assumption that heterosexuality is better or more “natural” than homosexuality, they do not rely upon the assumption of heterosexuality, nor do they see their own heterosexuality as a stable identity. These heterosexuals are in fact openly critical of normative heterosexuality, and are supportive of an agenda of equality. The media (even texts that scholars argue facilitate normalizing

heterosexuality and keeping heterosexuality within the realm of taken-for-granted) works in conjunction with, and becomes integrated within everyday life in such a way so as to further this queer project. It is important to note that it is difficult to ascertain which experience—interactions with media or interactions with friends/family—is more influential in queering heterosexuality. While it is easy to ascertain that the individuals in this study have daily interactions with the media, while that is not always the case with their gay and lesbians friends and family, we can't use this data as necessarily supportive of an argument that the media is somehow more influential than real people. I would argue, that making this determination is unnecessary; rather, it is precisely the interactional effect that is the most powerful, that either component would operate differently in isolation from the other.

### **Watching TV, Thinking Activism**

In an article about democratic media activism, William Carroll and Robert Hackett discuss the issues of “media reform” and “media activism” (2006). They make clear two trajectories of media activism: “democratization through the media” and “democratization of the media themselves” (84). For Carroll and Hackett, media activism is a process through which social actors engage in politics by relying on the media as an important activist communication tool, or it is a process whereby social actors struggle to improve the quality of media products, as well as open up access to create a participatory media (2006). This approach to the relationship between media and activism sees the media as both a site that is in need of social change, as well as a tool for engaging in non-media related activism. For example, they understand “democratization

through the media” as “the use of media, whether by governments or civil society actors, to promote democratic goals and processes elsewhere in society” (84). In my interviews with gay and straight media audiences, it became evident that GLBT media representations are being read in ways that allow audiences to engage democratically through the media. For example, Holly said in an email interview that,

As much as I always complain about the monotonous storylines and the stereotypes on tv I actually think it has influenced me in the way that I see more different ways to lead one's life. I could never ever encounter so many different people and situations in real life to help me to stay open-minded. The internet is an even bigger factor in that, because with tv your only the audience. Online you can talk with people about shows and see so many other views than your own (especially concerning religion, race and sexuality).

Holly recognizes the problems with media content, such as stereotypes, while also seeing the media—TV and the internet—as important locations through which to engage with others around the issue of sexuality, among others, and to stay open minded. It is in this place of open mindedness that the men and women I interviewed expressed their politics—in thought and in action—and how their politics were shaped by their media consumption. For example, Jackie understood her support of television shows with GLBT content as a form of activism:

I end up seeking out these kinds of shows (mainly by frequenting AfterElton.com) because I believe gays are terribly underrepresented on TV, so I'd like to support the shows brave enough to show two guys making out. ABC's my favorite network by far: Brothers & Sisters is great, Ugly Betty slightly less so (I mean, love their gay characters, but no Marc/Cliff kiss yet? Boo!), and Grey's Anatomy is making pretty good progress now with the Callie/Erica romance. I haven't seen Dirty Sexy Money yet, but I would watch for Candis Cayne.

Jackie sees GLBT representation as an important issue, to the extent that she makes active choices about what she watches so as to line up with her political identity. Further, she feels that supporting the content that is on the air is an important step towards changing the situation. The way that she discusses representation, in itself is part of a change process—shows with GLBT content are “brave enough” to go there—and her support of these shows is a way for her to insert herself into the change process.

Mark, a straight male—one of the few whom I was able to recruit into this study—told me about how a co-host on the Howard Stern show, who is an out gay man, made him rethink his own ideas about homosexuality; that is, in this example, the media allowed him to rethink his own internalized homophobia. He went on to argue that it was listening to this radio program that has also made him a more vocal proponent of gay marriage, and other gay rights issues. Mark then shows another way we can understand representations, and how representations are used in everyday life to both change, reflect and engage in social change and activism.

As indicated in Mark’s discussion of his shift away from his own homophobia and towards a vocally political stands in support of gay rights, including marriage, media representations have been used by my participants towards increased community and political involvement. D’Acci asks in a paper about the representational politics of gender, “how do audiences use cultural representations to rally for changes in conventional social assumptions about gender?” (2004:384). There are some trends in my data that indicate that individuals are engaged, and are in fact using the media as a tool in presenting challenges to traditional assumptions about (hetero)sexuality.

Finally, some participants indicated that their exposure to GLBT media representations has played a role in firing them up towards more direct activism on behalf of the GLBT community. For example, Michael wrote to me (in an email interview),

This is war, Peacock! Contrary to the common wisdom, watching television and participating in the ancillary media (discussion boards, journals, etc) does not make me more passive and couch potato-y. It energizes me to be more active, more engaged in those arenas, more creative in addressing issues, makes me feel more of a duty to keep my voice out there as a participant making noise for the cause for equality and justice. Not to sound pompous.

Michael is aware of, and problematizes the notion that watching television is a passive process. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies worked furiously to argue (most often in theoretical works of scholarship) that media consumption is an active process. Douglas Kellner, for example, writes that the purpose of critical media literacy is to “empower individuals to become more autonomous agents, able to emancipate themselves from contemporary forms of domination and able to become more active citizens, eager and competent to engage in processes of social transformation” (1995:126). Michael’s understanding of his own encounters with media provide empirical support for Kellner’s stance that media literacy and activism are an important intersection. Michael’s active media consumption—for example, participating in on-line discussion boards—and his life history as a gender non-normative gay man are what instigate his drive towards equality and justice. Kellner’s stance, as quoted above, is grounded in his belief that critical media literacy is a pedagogical approach; Michael, however, illuminates that critical media literacy is developed through everyday life practices.

Jackie, a 19 year old heterosexual woman living in New York, told a similar story. Jackie's first exposure to gay and lesbian media representations happened when she was 12, before she had any gay and lesbian friends. In fact, for her, queer media content was the impetus for changing this; that is, she sought out the gay and lesbian community as a consequence of her television watching. In her words, "I've always lamented my lack of a Gay BFF. There weren't a lot of out guys in school since it was a Catholic school. I'd say *Queer as Folk* definitely made me more politically aware, so while I went to the parade unaccompanied, I ended up making a lot of awesome new friends there." Certainly, her desire for a "gay bff" can be linked back to the allowed spaces—stereotypes—of gay media representation as the best friends of straight women. Ingraham (1999) critiques the media narrative that emerges in films such as *My Best Friends Wedding*, arguing that they depoliticize gay sexuality and identity by writing gay men's sexual behaviors out of scripts, and writing them as being at the beck and call of their straight female best friends. A consequence of this narrative, as well, is that it is still a story that is developed about the importance of male-female relationships, which continues to subtly normalize heterosexuality in the minds of the audience (Ingraham 1999). However, Jackie's response to her desire for a "Gay BFF" did not result in her reliance on a normative heterosexual approach to sexuality and to her interpersonal relationships. Rather, *Queer as Folk*, a television show, strengthened her political identity to the extent that she sought out the gay community, and worked to establish friendships while attending a staple of gay community politics—the gay pride parade.

Lynette, whose relationships across sexual identity are a requirement for her social life, and who, as described previously in this chapter, structures her social interactions around the media, also ensures that she remains engaged with community politics:

Since that time, I have become involved in many organizations. I always put together a group to walk in the AIDS Walk, and have been doing so since 2001. The majority of my involvement was with Lakeside Pride. I became color guard captain for two years, along with working on the business committee as the grant writing coordinator. I was involved with Lakeside Pride from 2000 to 2004, if I remember correctly. Due to school my involvement stalled for the past three years. I worked with ROTC Chicago to solicit donations for a fundraiser. I was also able to participate in the Gay Games when they were here and performed in the opening ceremony. I play on a gay softball league on Sundays, which I immensely enjoy. I am looking forward to getting more involved in organizations. My dream job would be working for one of the glbt non-profits in the area. I check the websites for the AIDS Foundation, HRC, Center on Halsted, Equality Illinois and Howard Brown Health Center weekly for jobs or volunteer opportunities.

Of course, it is these same political involvements that have led to her interpersonal friendships; in this way, Lynette has been able to use both media consumption and political activism as important resources in ensuring the quality of everyday relationships she has, while also allowing her to be as politically committed as she desires. Thus far politics has played an important role in her personal life, and as she concludes, she hopes this to become her profession.

For example, Jackie discussed how her experiences with the media led to her calling out people she encountered in everyday life of their homophobia. In her words,

The show that completely kicked the door down for me was the Showtime version of Queer as Folk. Yes, it got crappier and crappier as the seasons went on, but it definitely deserves credit to opening a lot of otherwise

oblivious people's minds to the lives of LGBT people. It motivated me to become a more vocal supporter for LGBT rights. I developed a very "ARRGH HOMOPHOBES!" attitude after watching the show... I actually got into an argument over the topic of gay rights with a friend. He insisted that homosexuality is a psychological disorder triggered by sexual abuse, I called him on that bullshit, and since he's got a massive ego and doesn't like to lose debates, it tainted our friendship. It's okay, though, I'd rather not associate with such narrow-minded assholes, anyway.

So while encounters such as this have real-life consequences, where straights who challenge others' homophobia are at an increased risk for damaging and losing friendships, this loss was not framed in negative terms. Rather, for Jackie, this was a positive, because her political identity didn't include being friends with people who didn't support her politics. Thus, framing her loss of friendship in this way is in itself a political act. Janis, a bi-curious heterosexual woman, has incorporated GLBT related activism into her work with HIV/AIDS. She actively engages with the media in general, and GLBT media in particular, and reads these texts critically and with a desire for increased attention to safe sex in representations of (all) sexuality. Her experience as a media audience member coupled with her work experience, tell her that media representations are important and have real-life implications.

Other participants spoke of their political involvement in more subtle ways. For example, many audience members that I spoke with recognized some problems—in their opinions—of GLBT representations, and choose to engage in public (on-line) discussions of these issues. It is my argument that given the public nature of these conversations, that participation is a form of activism. This is especially true given that there is some documentation (see Tabron 2004) that television writers and producers are engaged with



such conversations. One woman, whom I interviewed over email, and contacted through televisionwithoutpity.com feels that, "...W&G [Will and Grace] was a half-baked solution, a kind of alibi gay show. The shows I liked were for example Oz. It was always one of my favorite shows, because there were so many different characters and different gay characters. Or like *Six Feet Under*. The character first, sexual orientation later." This kind of statement can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. First, that heterosexuals are increasingly aware of the issue of representational politics shows that they are not always operating under the assumption of heteronormativity; that they are thinking about and discussing the need for quality GLBT representation illuminates that they do not expect (and thus do not take for granted) their media to be heterosexual. At the same time, the idea of "character first, sexual orientation later" invokes a sexuality based "color-blind ideology" that hopes to "not see" gay characters' gayness. This is akin to what Gamson (1998) refers to as "the paradox of visibility," where representations become engaged in political negotiations of freak versus normal, good versus bad, similar versus different. We can see these contradictions not just in the texts themselves, as Gamson discusses of talk shows, but also in these audiences' interpretations. Even as some heterosexuals in the viewing audience are driven to activism, they still rely on some of the same discourses of heteronormativity.

On a discussion thread about the television show *Private Practice*, some of the participants were talking about an intersex storyline. Many of the participants watched the episode and were driven to discuss and debate the issue, both in their interpersonal lives, and by writing and posting on-line. One woman wrote:

I thought tonight's PP was great. Along with having 2 Buffy alums the intersex storyline was very moving. Me and two of my roommates got into a long debate about the issue, pretty much them both against me. I was for not doing surgery until the child was old enough to decide themselves. They thought that surgery should be done, and they had no problem when the family was saying they were gonna make the baby male even though there was a 70 percent chance that child would identify female. It was driving me crazy, lol. We all finally just agreed to disagree.

This one television episode instigated a heated discussion about the issue of surgery and intersex infants; even though the debate concluded by agreeing to disagree, the show was still able to start conversations about the issue, to the extent someone felt strongly enough to continue the conversation on-line. Another poster responded to this note by supporting her challenge to her roommates, and another participant made recommendations for reading about intersex, all framed towards social change and greater understanding of the issue.

A member of afterellen.com used the discussion forum as a place to rally around the removal of homophobic and hate driven material in YouTube. The initial poster shared the link to all of the information, so that others could go to YouTube and request the website block the users who are promoting hate. 19 other participants in afterellen replied to the discussion thread, each declaring their requests to YouTube. I am not sure whether or not similar attempts were made elsewhere. What I do know, is that it was reported that the channel and the user was in fact banned from YouTube, and this was reported only 3 days after the original request for participation. The internet and its public reach are a well suited site for politically engaged audiences to challenge problematic representations.

Based on their own accounts, consuming GLBT media and interacting with GLBT friends and family had profound impacts on heterosexuals (and vice versa). As evidenced above, the interactional effects of media and real-life created a level of awareness and openness that moved beyond “tolerance” to heterosexuals challenging heterosexism; that is, many of the heterosexuals in this study seemed to grasp the dynamics of power involved. As an extension of this, some of these heterosexuals took to the streets. May (1999) writes that “television’s programs are representations, reflections, and products of culture that have become central points of reference for many viewers throughout the world” (69). In addition, television representations become important points of departure; that is, problematic representations have instigated activism, for example, by going to gay pride parades with public signs of support, by challenging homophobic comments, and by joining the local chapter of the Human Rights Campaign. These heterosexuals’ exposure to queer media and queer people worked together to instigate heterosexuals involvement in queer political activism.

The media is taken up by individuals in both direct and indirect ways. The mediated context creates the space for people to enact agency around negotiating their lives and relationships around their sexual identities and politics. This mediated agency happens not just through media consumption, but through the ways individuals experience the media in conjunction with their everyday lives. That is, the media becomes embedded into their identities and social worlds, and it is in that location that the media is taken up as an important resource. In a direct manner, my participants made clear that they actively rely upon the media to structure their social time. They organized

everything from small intimate gatherings, to dates, to large group gatherings in bars and homes. After repetitive social experiences around media, these same communities of friends then talk about their own lives in media-coded ways, serving as a way to strengthen their social ties.

Another interesting way that the media is pulled into resource mobilization in everyday life is in the ways that individuals use media texts, and responses to media texts, as ways to navigate the often-felt difficult terrain across sexual difference. For example, given a lack of a language, or of communication resources, parents (in these examples) use media stories as a resource to illustrate concern, effort, etc...to their gay and lesbian children. Navigating the lives of fictional characters can be both a starting point of a shared language of media, as well as a way to depersonalize the conversation in ways that create a sense of safety for participants in the conversation.

Interactions across sexual difference are not always as tenuous as just discussed. My gay and straight participants alike talked about their media use as a tool to reach out to each other, to move past any supposed problems difference might cause, and to make clear their commitments to living their lives in community. Watching television, for example, in these circumstances was just an excuse; the enjoyment pushed well beyond the experience of watching, and landed in the experience of talking, sharing, learning, and building relationships in ways that allowed gays and straights to bond together, and to express their commitment to GLBT justice.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE L WORD—LESBIAN IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND BOUNDARIES

#### Introduction: Watching Lesbians

As discussed in chapters three and four, media stories are used in everyday life as resources in the construction of identities, negotiating interactions, and building communities. The purpose of this chapter is to build on such micro processes by focusing on a specific media text: *The L Word*, a Showtime drama about lesbians in Los Angeles, that aired from 2004-2009. The show centered around a community of lesbian and bisexual woman, who formed a “family of choice” (Weston 1997). The main characters were Bette and Tina, a professional couple who both formed a family and struggled to keep their long term relationship going; Jenny, an aspiring writer who started the show as a heterosexual woman, and as she came out, shifted from bisexual to lesbian identity; Shane, a hairstylist “player” who had a reputation for breaking hearts; Alice, a free-spirited bisexual who was a writer, radio host, and web-networking guru; and Dana, a professional tennis player who struggled with being “famous” and out. Other characters were Kit, Bette’s musician and recovering alcoholic half-sister, Helena, a wealthy philanthropist, and Max, a trans-man who entered the show as Moira, a butch lesbian.

“When I came out in the late ‘80’s”, says Tracy E. Gilchrist, a *Curve* magazine contributor, “I was hungry for images of lesbians on film. I trolled the aisles of the local video stores, skimming the boxes and examining plot summaries, searching for a crumb of lesbian representation. Now, with a click of the remote, I have *The L Word* at my command.” (October 2005). It became immediately evident to me, as seen in comments such as Tracy Gilchrist’s published in *Curve Magazine* that *The L Word* was going to make a big splash in the lesbian community. That is, the audience of *The L Word* made it clear at the outset that we were interested in, and concerned about, how “we” were being represented. As the first television show about lesbians, *The L Word* was thrust into an impossible task of representing the entirety of the community, and audiences made this expectation clear.

In addition to discussing the success of the show’s ability to represent, the audience members included in this study used this show, as did other participants in this study as illustrated previously, to construct their identities and to build and strengthen their personal communities. I will also take this analysis one step further by showing how these audience members experience the show at the intersection of their identities and communities. That is, another theme emerged from the data as pertaining to this show, was how audience members situate their everyday lives in the context of their ideas about a generalized lesbian community and *The L Word’s* representation of such a community. Here, the show serves not just as a resource for everyday life, but illuminates a conversation about the politics of lesbian representation, and where audience members see themselves as belonging to the community. As I read my data,

these audience members were often engaged in boundary maintenance, in discussing where they, as individuals as well as their personal communities of friends and family, are situated within this larger (potentially imagined) community.

Ken Plummer writes that, "...sexuality—and gayness—[are] not simply 'givens': they [are] wide open to social change..." (2003:517). In this chapter I will argue that *The L Word* is facilitating a change in the social construction of sexualities by increasing lesbian visibility. Gamson et al (1992), citing Gurevitch and Levy, argue that the media is

a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality. Participants in symbolic contests read their success or failure by how well their preferred meanings and interpretation are doing in various media arenas. Prominence in these arenas is taken as an outcome measure in its own right, independent of evidence on the degree to which the messages are being read by the public. Essentially, sponsors of different frames monitor media discourse to see how well it tells the story they want told, and they measure their success or failure accordingly (385).

The *L Word* audience is discussing through the show what story of reality they want told. The change this has led to is not definitive, however, the show serves as a foundation to discuss lesbian visibility, lesbian sexuality, and the lesbian community, and those conversations bring forth shifts—albeit negotiated ones—in thinking about and responding to lesbian sexuality. Kimberly said, in a focus group conversation, that her response to hearing about *The L Word*: "yeah, Lesbians, what? All the cast, really? That's never happened before... [laughing]". The show is argued to be groundbreaking, and the ironic statement (above) made by Kimberly highlights that. Dana Heller (2006) argues that

*The L Word* has mindfully explored the complexities of lesbian visibility and vision, the risks and pleasures of seeing lesbians in the world and of seeing the world as lesbians see it. The latter perspective, I would argue, is the Showtime series' unique contribution to television history. ...the creators, writers, and cast of the series understand the high-stakes game of representation and visualization that this lesbian-themed drama invites cable subscribers to play (55).

Heller indicates that the show is created and written by lesbian women; Illene Chaiken is the creator, executive director, and writer, and is publicly and vocally out as a lesbian woman. She is not alone among the show's staff and cast. Heller's point that one of the important contributions of the show is "seeing the world as lesbians see it" goes beyond the show's credits lineup. My research shows that the show has opened up the space for lesbians—not just the ones writing and acting the show—to voice their understanding of their community and the larger social world we all operate within.

Looking at life through the show also allows us to see social change as it is happening on the ground. That is the show is both an example of social change (as a first, it signifies a shift), and a reflection of social changes—as audiences talk about the show, they are also describing how lesbian life has changed, and how lesbian politics are shifting. For example, approximately three months after the sixth and final season ended, a member of the "afterellen" on-line community initiated a conversation regarding whether *The L Word* has had (negative) consequences on lesbians' body image (a question that was raised based on the initiating posters friends' theory of why she couldn't get a date). I argue that this one television show is facilitating a queering of the lesbian community as the show—and importantly, the audiences' reactions to it—forces us to accept that there is no "universal" lesbian. Rather, the lesbian "community" is



made up of a diverse group of women (and some men) with complex and intersecting identities. If there was a “universal” lesbian, than the lesbians included in this study wouldn’t have spent the past 6 seasons debating each other about the representational politics—where individuals situate their personal identities within the context of this cultural idea(l) of lesbians via *The L Word*. Providing lesbian and bisexual women with six years of shared cultural space, the show has provided a foundation to both build the community, to illuminate its within group difference, and to empower the vocal strength of the community.

Gay and lesbian television watchers do not take representation for granted, rather, they take it quite seriously. As Susan Driver (2007) writes of queer girls, they “are highly receptive and invested in the emergence of stories and images of girls on TV who perform desires and romantic longing for other girls” (59). Recently, a friend of mine said to me in an email that even though she didn’t always like the storylines of *The L Word*, that she will most definitely miss it when it’s over; she looked forward to the only weekly show she knew of that was about lesbians, and because she enjoyed the experience with her friends. On-line, fans make statements of emotional connection to the show regularly. For example, one poster writes in response to a column about the impending ending of the show,

I too found the article sad. Not just because this may be the last season of a show that I hold an emotional attachment to, but also because I, myself do not have a circle of lesbian friends that I can call my family....I guess that is why the L word is one of my favorite shows. I live vicariously through the fictional characters. (www.afterellen.com)

For her, the show was a point of access to a form of community, given that she didn't have access to one in her everyday life. It allowed her to feel connected to something even while lacking "a circle of lesbian friends that I can call my family." Though she didn't make this connection, her stated emotional attachment is likely situated within her use of the show as a tool to feel a part of something larger than herself. For *L word* watchers, the show has given them something important—the ability to feel a part of the larger culture (lesbian culture, American culture) to which they know they belong. They are no longer isolated in their rural communities nor confined to their urban ghettos. Now they can be seen, and accessed, anytime, anywhere, on TV, DVD, on-line, and in the many conversations about the show. As Driver (2007) puts it, representations of the GLBT community function as much more than positive role models, but enable the community to "hope and imagine through and beyond the specific conditions of their everyday lives" (59). And, as a woman posted on afterellen.com, "it does give us validation." And, as one of my interviewees stated, "it didn't matter if it was good or bad it was visibility, so I didn't care. It was exciting."

The voices of the women in this chapter, who are committed (that is they watched weekly, they watched seasons on DVD, they watched regularly with friends, they talk(ed) about the show online), while sometimes ambivalent, watchers of *The L Word* illuminate how media texts become embedded into our everyday lives, how we use those texts to reach out to others, and how we imagine the consequences of representations. The data and analysis presented in this chapter are important for those reason, but also because of the history of lesbian invisibility. Wolfe and Roripaugh (2006) write that

The L Word has elicited highly ambivalent and hotly debated responses among its lesbian viewers, revealing intense anxieties regarding lesbian identity and representation...[and] given the relative lack of viable lesbian protagonists in mainstream media, The L Word has good reason to be anxious over its portrayal of lesbians; as the first show of its kind, the show bears inordinate responsibilities and impossible representational burdens...(53-4).

With this in mind then, it is easy to argue why it is sociologically important to pay specific attention to these responses, debates, and anxieties, and to listen in the right places, that is, to listen to the men and women watching the show at home alone and with friends, in bars, on-line. As Gamson et. Al (1992) argue, media texts play an important role in the social construction of reality. *The L Word*, then, fills a void, and allows lesbians to emerge in culture as a more present possibility; it opens the landscape to imagine more realities, realities that include lesbian lives and loves.

The existing—albeit extremely limited—scholarship that has been published about *The L Word* engages in textual analysis. Some wrote about the show positively, arguing for its political import:

*The L Word* does not offer a documentary on lesbians for the straight viewer's education, or make a claim to sate all lesbian viewers in search of 'accurate' visions of themselves, although it plays to these desires. *The L Word* does provide a text about queer subjects made in part by queer authors, and the fact that openly queer producers, writers, directors and actresses collaborate on the show is understandably touted in public relations materials. *The L Word* approaches the task of examining lesbian culture through fictional means, self-consciously owning up to and incorporating the idea that it offers more of a theme park version than the 'real thing' (Moore 2007:19).

Here Moore is arguing that the show and its creators are aware of the potential problems of lesbian representation being read through a heterosexual lens, and that they play with

the notion that they can't represent everyone. She argues that the show's self-awareness allows it to be markedly queer. In addition, Eve Sedgwick argues that,

the series should make a real and unpredictable difference in the overall landscape of the media world. Palpably, the quantitative effect of a merely additive change, dramatizing more than one lesbian plot at a time, makes a qualitative difference in viewers' encounter with social reality. The sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinized, staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vastly livelier potential of a lesbian ecology (2006:xxi).

Many scholars warn against seeing more representation (quantitative) in and of itself as positive. Sedgwick takes on this comparison of quantitative versus qualitative representations, arguing that they operate dialectically. That there are many lesbian individuals in one show grants that show the potential to do more positive representational work by allowing multiple representational examples in one show.

Not all scholars are so kind. For example, the show immediately received criticism for its gendered representations of lesbian sexuality. For example, Judith Halberstam writes of the show that,

What I am not so excited about in this queer drama is the development of highly unlikely couplings between characters with little or no gender dynamics whatsoever. I am also unhappy about the show's centering of the never-ending and rather tedious dramas of the rather lame heterosexual-turned-bisexual Jenny, who can only find destructive ways to deal with her childhood sexual abuse and getting in touch with her Jewish heritage. Finally, I am really irritated by the show's deliberate erasure of genderqueer sex and genderqueer characters (Halberstam 2006:38).

As an academic watcher of *The L Word* myself, I have been unable to land on either side of this textual argument. That is, as we have seen, some scholars frame the show negatively, as yet another gay and lesbian show that falls short of its queer potential. Still

others argue fervently for its utmost potential, including that it “is perhaps more valuable as fertile ground for a long-overdue conversation about issues important to lesbian and bisexual women, from relationship problems to coming out at work to our place and visibility in American society” (Warn 2006:7). The reason I have been unable to pick a side, if you will, is because I believe the duality of positive versus negative is a false question.

The other reason I have been unable to come to any conclusions by simply analyzing the text is because of what I noticed happening first in my own life, and as I went into the field, into the lives of others. As I stated, while I watched the show I couldn't refrain from engaging in textual analyses, and neither can the other watchers that I have observed and spoken to. From week to week, my friends and I couldn't abstain from talking about the show. When we didn't watch it together, the next time we saw each other, someone would inevitably bring it up during the course of conversation. I observed similar patterns when watching the show at public showings at 2 local lesbian bars; watchers are always and immediately engaged with the text. No one ever really agreed on anything, in fact, this was never the point of the discussions. It always seemed like the fun was in the discussions, not the conclusions. There was no way to look at our conversations, as a whole, and use it to argue that the show equals “positive” or “negative” representation. For us, the show equaled a starting point for conversations about our lives as lesbians, and about the experiences we face as lesbians, and about how we interpret the behaviors of other lesbians. These things can't be found only in the text;

instead, they can only be found in the ways the text becomes embedded within the lived experiences of the community of *L Word* watchers.

### **The L Word: Mediated Interactions**

Right now I'm interviewing for a new roommate, and during my last in-person interview I couldn't bring myself to tell her I am bisexual. I talked about my job, showcased the queer magnetic poetry on the fridge, and dropped the L Word in my list of TV shows I said I'll watch, but I hate having to spell out my sexuality for someone else just to make sure he/she isn't going to throw a fit, make gagging noises, denounce my humanity, or start doing that weird ethnographer thing where they start asking a million questions about my sex life when it would never be appropriate to do so if I were the assumed heterosexual

As is seen in the above quote from Alyssa, a bisexual woman in her twenties whom I interviewed over email, media texts become resources for us to use in navigating interactions. In Alyssa's case, mentioning that she watches *The L Word*, among other queer cultural artifacts such as magnetic poetry, is a way to indicate to strangers-potential roommates that hers is a queer friendly space without having to engage in a full coming out process. She is able to avoid the component of such an interaction that she dislikes, while still being able to make clear what she would require of a roommate. She is also relying on a assumption of widespread knowledge of what *The L Word* is—even if potential roommates don't watch it—in order to accomplish this task. This is a clear example of how media texts become useful on the ground in ways that we couldn't predict without hearing from audiences directly. While I have attended to the issue of mediated interactions in general in chapter three, here I will discuss specifically how *The*

*L Word* is shaping lesbians' interactions, given that this is the most significant mass-cultural resource lesbians have been given by the industry.

As is the case with other shows that center on the lives and experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered characters, coming out narratives were intertwined with audiences reflections on the show. I believe that it is important to draw attention to this issue as it illuminates very clearly the ways that media texts become embedded in our everyday lives, as well as how our everyday lives become connected back to our larger culture. These narratives of coming out are both individual people's biographies, and a collective story of lesbian visibility. It has been well documented that lesbians have been invisible in the media (Gross 1999, Moore 2007, Raymond 2003, Warn 2006), as well as in everyday life as a consequence of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980). Thus, the biographies that emerge in relation to *The L Word* are important not just in and of themselves (which they are), but also because they simultaneously challenge this invisibility, countering with both a mediated and a real-life presence. To be clear, I'm not talking about one woman's coming out story, but rather a collective story.

These coming out stories are a bit more complex than women who say they realized something (their sexuality) that they didn't know before. What is more the story here is that the show provided a context for these women to become more comfortable with being women interested in other women. The way each woman puts it is a little different, showing that it's a process unique to individual; however *The L Word* provides an overarching cultural location for these women to engage in such a negotiation. The show also provides these women the necessary cultural capital and social space to share

their experiences publicly, with each other, in on-line communities and in the communities of their everyday lives. Thus, *The L Word*, a television show, a measly product of “the culture industry,” has played a crucial role in erasing lesbian invisibility, a project that is connected to both feminist and queer politics, both in the media and in everyday life.

Clearly indicating how this helps combat the history of lesbian invisibility, one woman writes on-line that, “...after watching TLW, I wanna walk around screaming out to the world the I'm pride of who I am.” Still another says that, “It has got to be the show the L word, b4 I just ignored my feelings and crap but now there is no denying, I'M GAY!! and proud.” These are not women discovering their sexuality for the first time, rather, these are clear examples of the ways that the show helps these women feel more comfortable with their place in the world. No matter the academic critiques of gender and racial representations on the show (as two examples of common textual critiques), as one woman writes, “my total guilty pleasure now though is The L Word. If those ones I mentioned before helped me admit it to myself, that show has allowed me to see it not only as acceptable in general; but that it is not something you should be ashamed of” (afterellen.com).

Another woman explains how the show became a way to make sense of her real-life experiences that alone, weren't enough to facilitate a full coming out:

I started off having a crush on this girl at school, but never thought that ‘hey, maybe I like girls too.’ I guess that sounds really stupid, but I was concentrating on the aspect of falling in love more than I was thinking about who I was falling in love with. Then, however, I heard about The L Word and got really interested and bought the dvd. I think I knew pretty



much after I saw Shane that I was definitely not straight. Hmmm kate Moennig (afterellen.com).

Here, the text of the show becomes a resource for her to make sense of her feelings; to connect her feelings to an identity; to establish a pattern of understanding rather than an isolated event. These connections that people make between their lives and their own experiences with the show clearly show how representational politics must be discussed as connected to the material world, rather than as separate from. No one person will react to, and incorporate a media text into their lives in the same way. Thus, generalized ideological conversations about a shows text must be understood in conjunction with the material world with which said texts interact.

During a focus group conversation (where the participants knew each other prior to the focus group) the following exchange took place:

Stacy: Queer as Folk. And, I think it's totally like out there. Have you ever watched it? It's like, wow!

Julie: yea it's a very, that was the first show, um, but that was like a real, like a lot of sex. But it's men.

Stacy: and it's weird, like they show everything, and like with women they don't.

Julie: when I first saw The L Word though. When did that come out?

Monica: 2004

Julie: Yeah those were, that was, I remember seeing, like, some advertisement about it, and I'm like "hmmm." and I was actually, right out of engagement at that time, and I was like, ooh.

Stacy: Did you start watching it?

Julie: No, I didn't start, I didn't start watching it until my friend Amy, she was talking about Showtime let's watch the l word and when I watched that I was like, oh, looking at things that never, I never wanted to look at things...with women at all. Like anything with [pause] you know, anything sexual at all. Like I totally and completely put that away from me completely.

Me: the first time you saw the l word were you watching it with other people? was it like an l word party?

Julie: I was by myself, and I was like, WOW...kissing and [laughs] and I got like, oh, that was right around, it was all at the same time, all that. my friend Amy was like watch this. No but I was like, it's more of like you're, this holding back holding back holding back instead of just letting yourself, feel, or whatever.

Monica: Do you think the L word played a role in making you feel more comfortable?

Julie: Yeah

Monica: How so?

Julie: [thinking] Well, just, what's her name? Carmen? I was hot for that girl. Every time I'd see it I would look for her....

Julie: I came out with my mom right around all that stuff [with friend Amy and The L Word].

Here we have a woman explaining how she tried to avoid seeing representations of lesbian sexuality as she was in the beginning stages of coming out to herself. However, through a coaxing from a new lesbian friend she finally sat down and watched The L Word, and now attributes this experience as one important part of her acceptance of her sexual desires for women.

In addition, the show became a safe platform for some women to talk about their lesbianism with heterosexual peers and family members. For example, one interviewee said:

I looove the L-Word more now than when I was first introduced to it in a Women and Pop Culture class in the fall of 2006, and for different reasons. At the time, with my analytical feminist eye, I would watch the first two seasons cursing the voyeurism and shallow plots. Now, while I haven't dismissed my earlier criticism, I immensely appreciate the hit lesbian television series because it is a hit lesbian television series. It's a conversation starter amongst my roommates, which helps because as "the bisexual college roommate" I'm sometimes reticent to talk about my sexuality to avoid awkward dialogue and questions. Turning on the L Word takes the focus off of me somewhat, and helps me talk to my roommates about my identity without feeling so directly implicated in representing the entire LGB community (Alyssa).

The show creates a safe space for this woman to discuss her sexuality and the LBT community in general with her heterosexual roommates, allowing her to engage more comfortably in dialogues that must be understood as important. That the show facilitates dialogues such as this illuminates how micro-level social change takes shape, even in the face of a recognition by this college student about the representation “problems” of the show.

Alyssa is not alone in her usage of the show to navigate relationships with friends and family. In a discussion thread on-line that I engaged in directly (stating up front my research intent) participants specifically discuss how *The L Word* shapes their familial relationships. Here are some excerpts from this dialogue:

I think having a gay daughter and watching all these things with me (including The L Word) has definitely helped her [my mom] come to terms with it and understand all the aspects.

I think if I was to come out to them in the future, I'd like to show them a coupla episodes of TLW even just to show Bette + Tina's relationship.

I've been gradually conditioning my mom with TLW and other queer movies for months now! Lol. ...Now that I've got her all into TLW, she's been referring less and less to my 'future husband' and more and more to my 'future...whatever.' Its really awesome cause now when I finally work up the courage to come out to my parents, it should be easy peasy!

These quotes illuminate the importance of the text in these women's coming out experiences. The first quote exemplifies how the show can be used by women who have already come out to help their families grow towards acceptance and understanding. The second poster indicates her desire to use the show after coming out, as a way to contextualize and validate her own identity as a lesbian. The third quote, on the other

hand, illustrates how the show can be used as a way to pave the ground for coming out at a later date. In this case, whether or not her mother is accepting in the end, the show is providing a context for this on-line poster to find the strength and comfort to come out to her family. Whichever trajectory is taken up, these women indicate that they are using *The L Word* as a way to bring the lesbian community into the life-world of their parents'; this allows the women to feel less isolated in their coming out, and to make clear to their families that they are not alone.

To be clear, not all the women who participated in this discussion thread agreed that *The L Word* would be useful in the same way. In fact, many women argued that because of some of the problems—bisexual invisibility, heterosexism, explicit sexuality—with the show, using it as a resource to come out or negotiate homophobia would backfire. Here are some of the points made by these women:

I think if you give your homophobic (or just clueless) parents a DVD of the L Word and say "this is what we're like", they may just end up thinking that most or all lesbians are rampantly promiscuous, irresponsible and materialistic. (Oh, and if you're bisexual, it's best not to say that this show represents you.)

I think my parents would freak out more about watching the *L Word* than me coming out (although.. I did try to come out when I was 16, and they went into denial and insisted being gay made me more prone to HIV and AIDS and that I could never be gay). Although, I don't think my dad really cared. My mom on the other hand...Also, my mom thinks *Sex in the City* is soft porn, so the *L Word* would be like... Lesbian soft porn to her.

well i watched the l word on demand and it saves the programs on a little menu or whatever. well one day my mother saw that it was on there and when asked i told her i was watching it. she completely freaked out! she insisted it was lesbian porn and went on and on about it. well i was telling her about all the plots and what was going on and she didnt want to listen. well everytime i was scrolling through the channels she would make me

stop at the l word and i would just change it after a few mins. well everytime i would come in the room she would be watching it! it was like this sick battle of her watching the l word looking for bad stuff in it (she would never actually watch full episodes but just watch little clips to see if she could find something). well the day that she actually found something i just happened to be walking in the room (it was the scene with max and grace i think) and she was all like "omg look it IS lesbian porn". end of the witch hunt. so now i am not allowed to watch it anymore but i still watch (how could i not!) while she is at work and just delete it when i am finished. :-)

Clearly, the issue here revolves around displays of lesbian sexuality; the presumption that is being argued here is that representations of lesbian identity are palatable, while lesbian sexuality is pornography. And all this is contextualized within the very real continued existence of homophobia and anti-gay and lesbian sentiments in our society. These women indicate that while scholars argue that representations of gays and lesbians that exclude sexual displays function to de-politicize sexuality, there might still be some benefits for individuals in their everyday lives who aim to use media texts to mediate their interpersonal relationships. There is no right or wrong here; rather, all of these women are sharing how the same show has shaped their interactions in divergent ways. One participant in this conversation stated, recognizing the contextual experience of viewer reaction, that its usefulness in such a context,

...depends in the mentality of the family. Some people take TV WAY too seriously, and if that's the case, then the L Word would definitely not help them understand their daughter coming out. But if they are more lighthearted and don't take it too seriously, then it could potentially help. For example, my cousin found out I was gay and was a little sketchy about it. Then one day we got onto the conversation of Alice from the L word, who she adores. Now, she's totally cool with it. So, it depends how people read the show :)

Henry Jenkins quotes John Hartley, stating that, “Hartley advocates that media scholars write from the position(s) of media audiences, recognizing and articulating the interpretive work that viewers perform, documenting their creative engagement with the media content” (2006:92). The ways that lesbians are using *The L Word* to navigate their personal identities, lives and relationships shows this creative work. Importantly, these women also show their knowledge of how the process works, as they themselves allow for multiple readings, something that some academics don’t allow. Thus, as Hartley argues (according to Jenkins), this analysis, “speaks from, about, and for the margins of popular culture” (2006:92).

### **The L Community: The Small Screen in The Real World?**

These past few years have been an amazing snapshot of my life and relationships, looking back at who I have watched the show with. And it has been such a great way to bring us together. Each season’s premiere party has been the lesbian event of the year as I have always seen the most eclectic, diverse group of queer women from across the city get together and just have a good time.

The above quotation, made by an on-line forum participant, reflects my time in the field, making observations at two local bars where *The L Word* is shown on multiple televisions each Sunday evening. Watching the show, it can be argued, has strengthened a feeling of community for many lesbian and bisexual women. This feeling emerges from the interaction between the on-screen community and the in-person community.

Malinda Lo (2008) wrote in an afterellen.com column that,

I have found fault with many of The L Word’s story lines, but there is one thing that I have always felt it did right. It revels in friendships between women. Many television shows have tried to do the same, most notably

Sex and the City. But none have reflected the way I feel about my friend sint eh same way that *The L Word* does. ... Even if I never loved *The L Word*, I did love what it did for lesbians: It gave us a publicly validated community. It gave us the opportunity to get together with our friends, every Sunday night, and celebrate each other.<sup>4</sup>

According to Lo, our feeling of community is strengthened by the community established in the text of the show; and the show is what is the starting point for this particular experience of getting together. Combine this with the “eclectic” group of women as described in the above quote from an on-line forum participant, and we can see how our sense of community has grown. We are seeing members of our community we hadn’t seen before.

Thus, importantly, while there have been lesbians on television prior to *The L Word* (*Ellen*, Ross’ ex-wife on *Friends*, Willow on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as examples), these characters were largely isolated from the lesbian community. *The L Word*, then, was and is not just about lesbians as individuals, or a lesbian didactic relationship, but about a group of lesbian and bisexual women who are friends; who are a family of choice (Weston 1997). The women on the show meet at coffeehouses with other women, go to bars with other women, and throw birthday parties for other women. They are not in and of themselves, but rather, they are there for each other. Thus, the show isn’t just a look into the lives of a lesbian woman here and a lesbian woman there, it is a look into the world of the lesbian community—one that starts on the show but materializes in the real world. As one woman said,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.afterellen.com/notesandqueeries/02-12-08?page=0%2C1](http://www.afterellen.com/notesandqueeries/02-12-08?page=0%2C1)

Never in my life did I think I'd have a big gay anything. But the women I've met through the shared simple experience of being gay often feel more comfortable surrounding me than people I've known my whole life. My straight friends accuse us of excluding ourselves, and I wish it was something they could understand. We bust out our guitars after and talk for hours. Anywhere there is a strong group of gay women I have a home. L Word is just our excuse to gay it up together and I hope we'll keep on having Sunday with the Big Gay Posse long after it's off the air.

As we can see in this comment, the show has created a context for strengthening the lesbian community in everyday life, through both private and public watching parties. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass speculate (2006) that '*The L Word* might have something important to tell us about contemporary television viewership in terms of interactive engagement and communities created *by* and *in* the viewing experience" (xxvii). This speculation has held true. All of the data—from in-person interviews to focus groups to on-line discussion forum conversations—support the notion that television watching has become a community creating and strengthening experience. During one of my focus groups, two women engaged in the following back-and-forth:

Kimberly: I think too, I was just thinking, when we weren't watching it at our friends, we would go to T's, the bar, because that added a whole level, a new atmosphere....with all the lesbians watching it

Terry: It was a whole different experience. We watched the finale there, didn't we?

Kimberly: Yeah; its just a whole different thing because there were all these people who respond and yelling,

Terry: "no shane!"

Kimberly: or would yell when jenny would speak and freak out.

These women spoke of enjoying the experience of a shared reaction to the show, or hearing others' reactions are similar and/or different to their own, and about being around so many other lesbians.



There are some specific watching patterns I have noticed when individuals gather at bars to view the show. In the main, women are there in small groups, sitting at tables with their friends and partners. What we have in these spaces, then, is one larger community that is made up of a bunch of small communities. During much of the show, the women discuss the show with each other at their tables. For example, during a mid-season episode (6<sup>th</sup> season, 2009), there was a group of women sitting around the bar at a local west suburban bar. A few were sitting and a few were standing. They were also including the bartender in their conversations. They were engaged with the show while also talking with each other about it—most often, someone would give previous episode history to one woman who hadn't been keeping up with the show. One of them made a comment about Alice looking hot, both physically and via personality. Someone joked that they wanted to kill Jenny too (one of the season's plotlines is the question of "who kills Jenny"). Looking around the bar, this is the kind of banter that takes place during the show; small groups of women engaging with each other, weaving back and forth between personal life gossip, and explicating on the shows plotlines and characters.

And at the same time, there are distinct moments when the entire bar is on the same page; where the watching experience shifts from being about small-scale groups of friends, to being an experience shared by everyone. For example, during the same episode mentioned above, the entire bar reacted at the same time, yelling and clapping and "woo hoo-ing" when Tina yelled at her producer. During the 6<sup>th</sup> season premiere episode, at the same bar, the entire group laughed and "ooh-ed" when Bette was defending Shane's infidelities. This response came from a shared knowledge of Bette's

history of cheating on her partners. In these moments, something in the storyline transcends the individual group, and garners the attention of the entirety. It is those moments where the show creates the space for individual members of small micro-communities to feel connected to the larger lesbian community.

These shared moments create the potential to give credence to our feeling of belongingness to something larger. And, though my data is insufficient toward my ability to empirically analyze this further, future research could assess the extent to which this feeling of connection to something larger creates the space for legitimizing feelings that are ripe for a more engaged lesbian politics. Just based on observation, these same bars that are creating the communal space for watching *The L Word* are donating their spaces for fundraisers and other such events that are bringing these same communities together toward more political goals. Again, this is an issue that warrants future attention.

### **Boundary Maintenance: Where Text, Identity and Community Meet**

The relationships that individuals have with shows that they connect with along axes of identity—particularly politically charged identities such as sexuality—illuminates the give and take relationship between a media audience member and her text. A media text—*The L Word* in this example—becomes a touch stone, a tool through which individuals connect themselves to their larger social world. As stated previously, representations of gays and lesbians in the media become used by gays and lesbians in the everyday world, and they get used as means to find institutional validation of their lives. Clearly then, talking about the representational politics of *The L Word* requires us

to move far beyond a conversation about positive versus negative representations. The way this text gets incorporated into the lives of every day watchers is far more complex than such a dichotomous framework allows us to see. Representation on *The L Word* becomes a mirror for lesbians to look into to assess their community; the show is making the community look back at itself in a new way. The issue of representation then, becomes important not in and of itself, but because the *visual* becomes a conversation about the *material*. Audiences are talking fervently about whether they “see themselves” in the show, all while describing what they “look like” in a way that expands the communities understanding of itself and its diversity.

For example, one forum participant states that, “as a young, anorexic city girl (call me a lipstick lesbian if you will) I realize that I do not represent the entirety of the dyke community,” while another writes, “then again, I’m somewhere between femme and soft butch, gothic and Native American, so I didn’t expect to see myself represented on the show.” Another poster writes that, “I think it’s definitely an important question, but the issue that I have, is that it’s impossible to represent all lesbians. We’re all vastly different—with different styles, ethnicity, levels of affluence or poverty,” while still another writes that, “I just find it extremely forced and pandering to stereotypes.” It becomes immediately clear that *The L Word*’s audience deeply cares about representation, and positions on the issue cover the spectrum. We also learn about the range of individuals who claim belongingness to the lesbian community—white girls, native Americans, anorexics, poor lesbians, etc.... As a result, through this debate about representation, we learn more about a diverse community. What *The L Word* does, then,

is tell stories of lesbian life in the 21st century on the screen, on the internet, at bars, and in homes, as audiences watch and talk about the show. It is in fact through representation—and critiques of—that these stories of lesbians' everyday life get told. Stolte and Fender (2007) ask, “how and why does a given social value come to shape how a person thinks, feels, and acts in a specific social situation? An important part of the answer to this question lies in the way the social situation is framed” (59). In this vein, given the consequences—thoughts, feelings, behaviors—the audience members included in this study have engaged in conversations where they ask some serious questions about how lesbians have been framed in *The L Word*.

The conversations amongst my participants—in interviews and on-line—make clear that individual identities and experiences in communities collide with representation in an interesting way. As participants situate their lives in relation to the text, they engage in boundary work. As Gamson (1997) writes, “Scholars now routinely note that social movements depend on the active, ongoing construction of collective identity, and that deciding who *we* are requires deciding who we are not” (179). Culture is seen as an important site for both drawing boundaries and in blurring boundaries, and these boundaries are both about micro level processes of claiming authenticity and about political struggles and social rights (Gamson 1997, Warikoo 2007).

The way that the audience members included in this study spoke about the text of *The L Word* illuminate both trajectories of boundaries as authenticity and boundaries as securing rights. Two areas of contestation emerged quite clearly—bisexuality, and transgender—issues that emerge via *The L Word* characters Bette, Alice, Tina, and

Moira/Max. Discussions about these topics deal with the question of “who belongs” to the lesbian community and makes clear what expectations the lesbian community has in terms of representation. Anti-bisexual and transgender sentiments are often framed as an issue with a stereotypical plot trajectory—a problem of representation, not a problem with bisexuality or transgender. For example, one poster writes, “I can’t believe the Tina storyline. Let’s just perpetuate the idea that what all lesbians really need to solve their lifes problem is a nice hard cock. Who wrote that crap and why?” (G.P.). While another writes, “I don’t understand why, when we finally get a butch-identified lesbian on the show, she has to be transgender. I think it gives a really incorrect idea of what being butch really means...” (R.S.). Clearly these posters frame the issue as one of representation—of how this one character’s story can be seen as reflective of *all* lesbians, thus perpetuating problematic stereotypes. At the same time, these statements and discussions can also be read as very protective of the lesbian community as woman only space, as directly against or negative towards bi and trans-women in the lesbian community.

That said, these critiques never go unchallenged, and the discussions are always grounded within a personal context, as well as situated within a plot-line of the show. For example, back and forth chatting about Max, the transgender character, are almost always connected to personal examples, situating Max within a larger community rather than isolating him as a “story,” making him more “real.” He is not a fiction in these conversations. In fact, in most posts that center around the issue of representation, no part of the show is framed as a fiction in its (perceived) impact. It is presumed by lesbian

viewers that straight (and/or non-lesbian) audiences will read it as non-fiction. For example, one poster writes that in her opinion,

this show is an embarrassment to our community and serves as an injustice to all that we are fighting for. It is a dangerous threat to the civil rights we seek to portray us as pathological, irresponsible, non-working, non-committed, freaks who “choose” this “lifestyle”... (D.T.)

This comment clearly illustrates her belief that the show is real in its impact, given her attention to real-life civil rights issues. This belief is shared throughout discussion board conversations. My interview participants shared similar concerns. A heterosexual woman who watches the show with her primarily lesbian friends commented,

I worry about, you know how lesbians are represented, and how gay men are represented on queer as folk because they are always just represented as dishonest not loyal promiscuous like, and that's not how the majority of *any* people, like that's not how it is. And so, that's what I worry about more than about feeling uncomfortable or anything watching a show about lesbians. So there's that. And then there's also like I'm watching a show about women versus watching a show about men.

I am arguing that media audiences situate their own readings of the show within this larger context of representational politics, and are using their friends and the internet to engage with this politic. The actual watching of the show, then, can be seen as just one part of a much larger experience; an experience that engages new media formats (here, television and internet). More importantly, it is clear that the issue of media representation is not the sole concern of academics; rather, audiences themselves care about this issue, and more than that, they engage publicly. An on-line forum about

television representation transforms into a discussion of material, everyday experiences as seen through the lens of representation on *The L Word*.

*Sexual Boundaries—Bisexuality*

On February 26, 2008, Nicole Kristal, a contributing writer for AfterEllen.com, published an article titled, “The L Word Reinforces Negative Bisexual Stereotypes.” Kristal noticed that Alice’s bisexuality seems to have all but disappeared since season one, and that by season four, Alice was making biphobic statements, such as “bisexuality is gross” (2008). She writes that, over the last three of its five seasons, *The L Word* has sent messages that erode positive representations of bisexuality by creating story lines and characters who reinforce myths that all bisexuals are crazy, in denial about their true sexual orientation, and likely to cheat on their partners for the other gender” (<http://www.afterellen.com/TV/2008/2thelwordbisexuality?page=0%2C0>).

Interestingly, what follows her column is a conversation amongst the community of everyday participants on afterellen, debating not just bisexual representation in *The L Word*, but bisexuality as it is understood through the context of these participants everyday lives—that is, via their identities, their friends, and their experiences in the world. The first few comments were from bisexually identified women who concurred with the author’s viewpoint that saw this representation of bisexuality as problematic. As it continued, however, the conversation got quite heated. For example, one lesbian woman wrote in response to some of the comments from bisexual women by saying that,

As a lesbian I'd like to thank you for this beautiful demonstration of the reasons so many lesbians have an issue with bisexuals! Statements like..."

I mean granted you are constantly surrounded by a "straighter" world but..." And isn't life easier like that! Especially when you never even bother like half the bisexuals commenting here, to give out any info on yourself on any LGBT sites! That'll help in making things "just easier" when you "get older"! ;) "We don't see gender we just see people." As opposed to us superficial lesbians who only care about gender, I guess? " maybe its because they actually can marry a man. Sometimes as people get older they want that old standard of settling down and having the family and its just easier that way." And that last one just sums it up very nicely! Thank you!

Her comments reflect a clear frustration not necessarily with bisexuals in general, but with bisexual women who engage in conversations regarding the mistreatment bisexual women experience from lesbians, and she makes clear, through a generalized statement that includes other lesbians, that she has issues with these bisexual women. She pulls quotes from bisexual posters to illustrate her points, and to present her counter-argument. Her conclusion makes clear that bisexual women's access to marriage through men is seen as a significant problem. Her comment was not left unattended to. The participants in this conversation spoke directly to each other, back and forth, as they engaged in a debate about *The L Word's* portrayal of bisexuality, and their feelings about the issue of bisexuality in the lesbian community via their personal standpoints. Through this conversation, bisexuality emerges as a clear point of contestation for the lesbian community.

This issue came to bear in other conversations amongst *The L Word* community of watchers. In a thread titled, "What I Learned About Lesbians from The L Word," one on-line poster jokes about what she learned: "don't worry if you are bisexual, it will pass within a season or two..." Here she is expressing her frustration with bisexual invisibility through a sarcastic frame. Bisexual invisibility emerges in part, Amber Ault



argues, because of bisexual women's "awareness of negative stereotypes of bisexuals [that discourage [them] from marking themselves as bisexual from 'fear of reprisal,' loss of legitimacy or efficacy, and from feelings of shame in both lesbian and 'straight' social spaces" (454). *The L Word*, as a lesbian social (through on-line communities and group watching parties) and cultural (through representation) space, is an interesting site of exploring the current place of bisexual women in the lesbian "community". The conversations centered around the show attend to bisexual (in)visibility, and bisexual acceptance (or lack thereof) in lesbian circles; that is, bisexuality is a site of lesbian boundary negotiations, and *The L Word* has become a cultural site through which these negotiations take place.

One woman, who was published in *Curve Magazine's* letters to the editor wrote the following:

What the L? When *The L Word* first aired, the lesbian community grasped onto it because it showed us not just as stereotypes but as regular people in real relationships of all kinds, including healthy, monogamous relationships. The show was witty, it was funny and of course it was sexy as hell! So, what the hell happened in season 3? We have more drama and tragedy than anything else. Worse than that, somehow this season has decided to focus on penises in more ways than one. What I want is what *The L Word* gave us in seasons 1 and 2. I want lesbian sex! Is that so much to ask from a show about *lesbians*? (June 2006)

This woman is upset by the presence of penises in a show about lesbians, and penises enter the conversation through the bisexual characters in the show. Thus, this feeling towards penises is directed toward bisexual women as not representing lesbians. A.H., a participant in an afterellen forum, said the following of Tina's relationship with a man:

...I feel like the writers portrayed her as 'not into women anymore'. Maybe it's just me. Maybe had Tina fallen in love with Henry...maybe I

could see bisexual. But to me it's was all about missing/and having 'D\*\*K'. I also believe having sex with a woman does not make you a lesbian...no more than women in denial out here sleeping with men when they are not into them in that way makes them str8. Then again...labels are just labels and sometimes that just doesn't fit either way.

Her statement reflects some ambivalence, and leaves the door open for fluidity in identity construction, while at the same time making a similar claim about the presence of male genitalia as a threat. This reflects that a continued lesbian feminist sentiment that sees men as the (political) enemy is circulating lesbian's understanding of their (marginalized) place in the world (Stein). Rust (1993) wrote that,

bisexual identification is widely recognized among lesbians as an acceptable stage in the process of coming out as a lesbian (Ponce 1980). A woman who has recently begun to come out is allowed to call herself bisexual because she is assumed to be in transition to lesbian identity. If she fails to adopt a lesbian identity within a reasonable period of time she will begin to attract criticism (Ponce 1980) from lesbians who suspect that she is 'selling out,' that is, denying her true self and her political obligation to the lesbian community to avoid stigma and preserve her privileged position in a heterosexist society (216).

Rust wrote this in 1993, and referenced Ponce, who published in 1980. Rust (1993) argues that lesbian's attitudes about bisexuality function in such a way so as to construct difference between the two groups of women. This construction of differences serves to draw boundaries with the consequence of preserving rights and resources. Lisa, a woman who identified as heterosexual but fluid in our interview, said that she doesn't claim a bisexual identity because of the stereotypes associated with it. She linked these stereotypes to media representations:

The few characters I can think of are usually in a straight relationship, experiment with someone of the same sex, and then decide they are gay or

lesbian. I think there is a real emphasis on choosing a team. It is seen as weak not to. The only storylines I can think of off hand which deal with it are in the beginning of the *L Word* and in *Grey's Anatomy*. In the *L Word* I think she decided she was a lesbian, other than her relationship with the trans guy. *Grey's Anatomy* is still playing out so I am not sure where that will go.

Her understanding is that bisexuals are pushed to pick a team, something that supports Rust's argument above that bisexuality is only accepted as an identity that women adopt as they are coming out, but once are comfortable with their sexuality they shed the bisexual label for a permanent lesbian identity.

When lesbians draw boundaries that exclude bisexuals, they are securing the limited resources they do have access to for "true" lesbians (Rust 1993). This requires negotiating the terrain of the social construction of sexuality, of delineating what/who qualifies as being a "true" lesbian, making clear that this is a process with material and political consequences, while reflecting the social nature of the process. I have illustrated here, that in beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is an issue that is still quite potent among lesbians, and *The L Word* has brought the conversation front and center. Joshua Gamson (1997) argues that boundary negotiations are inevitable in social movements centered around identities:

All social movements, and identity movements in particular, are thus in the business, at least sometimes, of exclusion. Their reasons, in addition to the general advantages of group solidarity, are good ones at both strategic and expressive levels. In political systems that distribute rights and resources to groups with discernible boundaries, activists are smart to be vigilant about those boundaries; in cultural systems that devalue so many identities, a movement with clarity about who belongs can better provide its designated members with the strength and pride to revalue their identities (179).

The current political debate surrounding gay marriage clearly infiltrates the boundary work happening amongst these *L Word* watchers, as many lesbians argue that bisexuals already have the right to marry, as they can “pass” as heterosexual when with an other-sex partner. Further, given some of the stereotypes of bisexuality that continue to circulate in culture, these lesbians could be protecting their ability to claim legitimacy and normality, as Butler (2002) and Richardson (2004) argue is discursively required for marriage rights, and thus propel the political marriage project. Jill Humphrey (1999) writes that,

From this vantage point, bisexuals and transgendered people represent a threat not only to the identity categories which have sustained lesbian and gay solidarities, but also to the civil rights agendas which have won them credibility within the union and elsewhere. Or rather, the prospect of queering the group is viewed as tantamount to the extinction of the group (224).

The debates about bisexuality amongst the viewers of *The L Word* supports Humphrey’s argument that bisexuals are a threat to “legitimate” lesbian identity, a legitimacy that is important in securing political power and social rights. Ann Swindler (2001) argues that it is important to understand culture—or in the case of my work here, popular culture—by seeing “how culture actually works when people bring it to bear on a central arena of their daily experience” (1). In these conversations, individuals are using *The L Word* as a way to make sense of their own sexual ideologies and experiences, and as a site through which to engage with communities, making clear how media texts become important in everyday life negotiations; as well as seeing how representations matter for audiences as they negotiate identities with political import.

*Gender and Sexual Boundaries—Transgender Men*

For the remainder of this chapter I will focus on one character in the show—Moira/Max—addressing the issue of transgender representation in the lesbian community. To be clear, this is not general analysis of transgender representation; rather, it is a specific conversation about transgender presence on *The L Word* and in the lesbian community. I argue that Max’s character is a clear example of the shared process of defining the terms of the lesbian community—what Judith Halberstam calls the “butch/FTM border wars” (Coogan 2006, p.18). According to Coogan, these wars are “intense, yet sometimes subtly articulated, political battles waged by differing marginal subjects for visibility and inclusion within, as well as affiliation with, lesbian communities” (2006, p.18). *The L Word* creators, then, are serving to facilitate discussion about these boundaries by writing Max into the story. The ensuing conversations are both part of the border wars, and analysis of them. To contextualize, consider the following excerpt from the show:

***The L Word, Season 5, Episode 1, Podcast—Max filming “Alice in Lesbo-land: a bi-weekly pod-cast for bisexual and sapphically inclined ladies. And their friends”***

*Alice: So, I bet the CU LGBT student union is very thrilled that their V.C’s in the club, huh? Have you paid them a visit?*

*Phyllis: no I’m actually a little embarrassed cause i’m not sure what the T stands for. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual...tentative?*

*Alice: Good one!*

*Max: Sorry guys, I have to change the tape.*

*Alice: Um, “T” is for trannies.*

*Phyllis: Trannies?*

*Alice: yeah, like Max.*

*Max: transgendered.*

*Phyllis: Oh.*

*Max: you know, people who have changed their sexes from male to female or female to male.*

*Phyllis: that's very interesting. Have you actually had the sex change operation?*

*Max: well, I did go to san francisco to get top surgery, but um, I decided not to go through with it.*

*Alice: yeah, uh, why cause you were so ready to do it?*

*Max: I guess I thought about it and its a really personal decision an the fact is is that you can lose sensation in your nipples so I decided I didn't want to risk that. I mean, for some guys they don't feel themselves like fully male unless they can have a male contoured chest and be able to take their shirts off and stuff. But for me, I guess, in the end I decided that I felt enough of a guy as is without the surgery, so.*

*Phyllis: That is fascinating I had no idea...*

*Alice: you know I feel like we're getting a little off topic here for "our chart"*

*Max: Why is it off topic?*

*Alice: Well, I mean "Our Chart" is for lesbians*

*Max: I thought our chart was for everybody. It's "our chart," I mean doesn't that suggest that its inclusive?*

*Alice: Well, sure Max, I mean that's a little technical, but yeah it's for everybody... [Kit interrupts with a phone call for Alice]*

*End scene*

This scene takes up directly the question of trans-inclusion in the lesbian community, with Alice and Max debating whether "ourchart's" inclusiveness is for lesbians, and questions what it means to be a lesbian. This conversation isn't just about representation—about making marginalized groups visible—it is also a question of who belongs, and what the lesbian community looks like. One *L Word* watcher raised the issue of diversity and representational politics in *Girlfriends* magazine letters to the editor:

I read the article about Daniela Sea, *The L Word's* new butch ("Sea Change," January 2006), and while I agree Moira's a little more masculine than Shane (what's with that new haircut?), she's really not a true butch. When are we going to get a real butch, not a Hollywood version of one? We still don't have a real portrayal of the diversity in the lesbian

community. *Go Fish* was the closest example, and that was back in the early nineties. Too bad Laurel Holloman couldn't be as butch as she was in *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*. (March 2006).

She makes clear the difficulties of the conversation as she both makes evident her desire for diversity, while at the same time making claims about who gets to count as a “butch” lesbian.

The show is definitely pushing the boundaries of how we think about sexuality and gender. A queer discourse has entered both the television show and the audience community's lexicon. For example, Shane, a character on the show, is quoted as saying, “sexuality is fluid, whether you're gay, you're straight, or you're bisexual, you just go with the flow.” While Alice, in the same conversation says, “...most girls are straight until they're not, and sometimes they are gay until they're not.” Not only do we see the usage of the word “fluid” to describe sexuality, we see written into the script a conversation framed around unstable sexualities. Similarly, one discussion board participant stated (in response to a sex scene including Max, a transgender character),

The fact that they're willing to take what little precious time Max has and show us that he's the queerest of the queer is awesome... This show has supposedly stressed the fluidity of gender and sexuality, but the only one we really see any of that in is Max... (T.W.)

This comment is centered around the notion of fluid sexuality, illustrating how fluid sexuality has been incorporated both inside the shows script, and outside in the world of the everyday. In addition, this audience member is engaged in what Stuart Hall (1997) refers to as a “counter-strategy” that works to “intervene in representation” (p.277). That is, this conversation is part of the “politics of representation’ [that is] a struggle over

meaning which continues and is unfinished” (Hall 1997, p.277). The following quote is part of the same conversation that T.W. (above) was engaged in:

OOOKKKKK I’m sorry but can I just say...that whole thing with max and the translator was not hot at all!!! Lol it was more just disturbing...the translator was just a bystander, not really a character anyways and max...just let him like girls already!! Stop making things too complicated. I’m getting frustrated!!! (M.P.)

Clearly then, this is part of a continuing conversation to which Hall refers, where meanings and ideas are debated, rendered complicated and contradictory.

It is my belief that this is a dialogue engaged with continually (re)defining who belongs to the community, what the community looks like and how it should be represented visually. These conversations weave back and forth between the T.V. show and forum participants’ (auto)biographies—becoming one larger conversation about sexuality, gender and negotiating every day lives. We can see through these conversations how difference is handled; the extent to which difference is used as a bridge or a wall, illuminating an on-going process of meaning making, and of defining the borders of the community.

During the course of one of my focus groups, one of the participants elaborated on her feelings regarding issues of representation on *The L Word*:

I was just thinking about...what’s ah...Max on *The L word* and how I wasn’t happy with that stereo, with that storyline. But I can’t think of how, what its better path would be. It seemed really stereotypical to me, it seemed,

ME: like what part of it?

Like, it seemed like every, scenes with max were like, lets’ tear apart max, or it seemed like let’s do an an after school special on what a transgender



person is like. I don't know how to fix that, I don't know what would be better for that but I was just thinking how would *The L Word* represent different people? And I don't know how to answer that. I guess they attempted, so yay for that, but I don't know how it could have been better.

Max's character was introduced during the third season (2006) as "Moira," a butch lesbian dating Jenny, a main character on the show. Moira's entrance was well publicized, and seems to have emerged as a direct consequence of the fans' critiques of the lack of butch representation in the show. *Afterellen.com* quotes Ilene Chaiken, the show's creator, as saying of Moira, "She's our first real butch on the show—a fabulously attractive butch, but nonetheless a real butch" (*AfterEllen*, 2008). It became immediately clear that Moira was a gender bender, and after a few episodes it was evident that this gender bending included passing as a man. By mid-season, Moira began the transformation to Max.

This transformation has been complex: at first playing with clothes and "packing," then taking testosterone. He contemplated top surgery alongside a friend with breast cancer, he has been "in the closet" passing as a heterosexual man at work, and he is now an out non-operative trans-man. His self-presentation and identity has shifted across the various contexts of his relationships. Just before he began using testosterone, he presented as, and was interpreted as, a butch lesbian in the context of his relationship with Jenny. Later, he presented as male, and was accepted as male, in his place of work, where he began to date a woman. In this context, he was not out as a transgender. He experienced, and was read, as a straight man. His character and his character's intimate

relationships illuminate the complexities of gender and sexuality. Raine Dozier's research on transmen documents this dynamic, as she writes that transmen

illustrate the relativity of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is based not exclusively on object attraction but also on the gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interaction. Sexual orientation can be seen as fluid, depending on both the perceived sex of the individual[s] and the gender organization of the relationship (2005, p.314).

Dozier argues that sexuality is shifting, and context specific, challenging notions of essential and permanent sexual orientation. Like the transmen in Dozier's study, Max can occupy different identity statuses, and experience sexuality differently across his relationships. How we understand, name, and experience our sexualities is not static but can change based on many factors including self-identity, perceived sex category, gender dynamics, and partner identity. This shifting creates the space for a queer understanding of sexuality to emerge. A character such as Max challenges the boundaries of a sex(uality) and gender binary system, and renders both the categories and the system itself a problematic. This problematic becomes evident in *The L Word* fans' on-line discussions.

Coogan (2006) argues that the butch/trans discussion in the lesbian community is in part about the usage of biological sex as the determinant for being 'a lesbian,' for entrance rights into the community. This determinant is not fixed rather, it is an on-going dialogue, a continued contestation. As Gamson (1997) writes, "scholars now routinely note that social movements depend on the active, ongoing construction of collective identity, and that deciding who *we* are requires deciding who we are not" (179). Max's character enters into this conversation, challenging biological sex as the marker of access

to the lesbian community, about who belongs to the community, and we can see this process play out in discussion forums. As Max has transitioned, across three seasons, the talk has also shifted in focus; Max was in season four a pre-operative trans-man, however in season 5, he is a non-operative trans-man. What we see then, is a shift in the border conversation from Max's genitalia—is he a lesbian if he has top and/or bottom surgery?—to that of his sex partners. Now the question of his belongingness to the lesbian community seems to center around his having had sex with a gay man, thus shifting the question away from biological sex, and towards connectedness to men. As Coogan stated, summarizing Halberstam, these negotiation strategies are subtle—they are often framed as forum discussions focused on the character, and yet, through various dialogical tropes they become conversations about the lesbian community at large, and trans-participation in the lesbian community. This conversation queers sexual identity categories, as they illuminate the social constructedness of sexual identity while challenging the essentialism of sex, gender and sexual binaries.

Here, *The L Word*—a television show— becomes a part of the process of meaning making; of what the lesbian community is, of who belongs, of who has sex with whom and how. As people write about and process their reaction to what they've just watched on television (Max and Tom having sex, for example), they are determining for themselves what they think and feel about these issues, both on-screen and off-screen, and are engaging in a public dialogue where they are participating in (re)defining the terms of both lesbian and trans-sex, and trans participation in the lesbian community.

Henry Jenkins (2006) writes extensively on fan communities, and their abilities to theorize for themselves. He writes that, “all I had was the impulse that fans were important theorists of their own practices” (p.62). In these on-line forums, we can observe the community’s desire to claim their ability to define their own terms, rather than be defined through the terms of (heterosexual) others. One poster gets at this when she writes that, “thing is, we want the show to represent our community in as many ways as possible” (Holly, After Ellen, 2007). Here, posters on the forum work to take control over how their community is represented, to define the terms of their community’s representation. *The L Word* butch/FTM border conversation is a definitive part of this process. As one poster writes a critique, another writes in praise, leaving the topic always open for continued dialogue and (re)interpretation; leaving the borders both policed and under negotiation:

Also, L word STILL has no butch characters. Moira/Max does not count because he’s a transgendered man which isn’t the same thing! L word is making it look as if the natural progression for butch women is to eventually become transgender. (Georgianne, After Ellen, 2006)

And Finally. Max. I hated that he was away for three episodes but DAMN did he come back with a freakin vengeance! And had a hell of a sex scene! It probably bothered 97% of the people watching, but I loved it! I loved the fact that they showed that part of the gay community.... I was excited for the representation, excited for the character, just excited! (Patricia, After Ellen Forum, 2008).

All while negotiating, however, fans enact and highlight their agency with each other, with the writers and producers of the show, and with the general public. These deliberations have an important public reach. Thus, those who may live their lives outside the lesbian community are still privy to—and potentially impacted by—these

discussion forums. The stories in the show come to frame conversations about issues such as transgender sexuality, and trans-phobia in the lesbian community, issues that impact life on the ground.

Furthermore, we can see how participants use the on-line forum as a location to process their reaction, their thoughts and opinions, which are not fixed, but rather are open and mutable:

Max—Woooooow. I'm a little speechless. I don't know how to really feel about the Max doin' it! I mean...wow. It was so unexpected!! I ain't seen the dude in like...5 episodes! Then. WhAM!!! He's getting' it with the interpreter. I gotta think about this one. (Emily, After Ellen Forum, 2008)

I actually liked Tom and Max. Man that was a lot of sex....alot. A bit too much for me. Some just wasn't necessary. (Sarah, After Ellen Forum, 2008)

Sex scenes were good except for the nasty Max one. Maybe I just don't understand it. I guess she's a gay boy now ha. (Brianna, After Ellen Forum, 2008)

In addition to responses that are more ambiguous as the ones quoted above, there are also more direct conversations, where people with strong opinions discuss the issue with each other. These conversations, importantly, shift between the television show and participants lives, weaving the show into the realm of everyday. For example, one forum participant writes,

MAX HAS LOST HIS MIND~WHY DID THEY DO THAT TO HIS CHARACTER? NOW WHAT IS HE GONNA BE STRAIGHT>>>??? I'M SO CONFUSED>. NOT TO MENTION I ALMOST THREW UP~ (Rhianna, After Ellen Forum, 2008)

A reader of this comment can interpret the all caps to illuminate heightened expression on the posters' part. Another forum participant engages directly with this comment by writing the following reaction:

Almost threw up? That's not nice. I know plenty of transpeople who have very fluid sexuality—one of my closet friends used to be a goldstar lesbian, then she transitioned, and now is a gay man. It's quite natural for these things to happen. ...Just as we lesbians like to be accepted, so would transpeople. Maybe vomit's not the way to promote love and acceptance. I give Max, and the writers of the L word, a thumbs up for this episode. (Anne, After Ellen Forum, 2008)

This conversation illuminates the ways that these communities use *The L Word* to frame conversations that are much more personal for audiences—this is not just about a character on a show, but it is also about people's identities, friends, partners, crushes, and family members.

### **Conclusion**

The functional benefit of Max's character, as a representation, is the conversation being had by audience members. These on-line audience members are talking to each other in ways that I would describe as queer. I argue they are talking queerly because the conversation is inconclusive, it is on-going and changing; thus not essentialized. The outcome of the conversation as a whole is a sexual discourse that is fluid and contextualized. Essentialist notions of lesbian identity still permeate the discussion boards, however, they are always and continually sitting side by side with queer notions; which always and continually force us to ask questions about essentialist understandings of lesbian sexuality.

*The L Word* on-line community is talking about Max in ways that challenge our traditional understandings of sex and gender. “Lesbian” identity is grounded in a binary sex category system (female/male). Discussions about Max, and trans-men in general, cause a rethinking of sex categories that disrupt more than a definition of lesbian, but also a normative heterosexuality that depends upon a sexed binary. In a review of Judith Butler’s work, Gill Jagger writes that “it is not that sex and gender produce heterosexuality but that heterosexuality produces sex and gender in a binary form” (2008, p.1). Thus, a system of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) and the dynamics of inequality that emerge from it, create and thus rely upon sex and gender binaries. I argue that the way that transmen (such as Max) blur the binary of sex and gender results in a disruption of heterosexism; it is a queer representation and conversation precisely because it challenges the center.

We can see through these dialogues how reactions are taken from the show into the real world through discussions of trans-men in the real world. This is a queer conversation because it is asking questions about sexual binaries, disrupting categories just enough to leave them open for negotiation. In these forums, lesbian sexuality starts as the privileged status, and furthermore, “homosexuality ceases to be the exclusive site of sexual difference” (Stein & Plummer, p.135). Heterosexism relies upon the assumption and normalcy of heterosexuality. In the on-line forums included in this study, the assumption to be made in this space is centered on lesbian identity.

Through the course of the conversation, any kind of stable sexuality begins to lose its footing. Discussions, such as ones that revolve around bisexuality, question the notion

of a permanent sexuality, and stress contextualized experiences. All the while, it is evidenced that transgender and bisexuality still remain marginalized in some locations, highlighting the dialectic of hegemonic dominance. As John Storey (2003) writes, “popular culture is one of the principle sites where these divisions are established and contested; that is, popular culture is an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups” (p.51). And in this particular location heterosexuality is not normatively invisible, but specifically pushed to the margins. The hegemonic struggle at the forefront is taken up by lesbians, and is about bisexuality and transgender as subordinate statuses in the lesbian community.

That there is public space for this struggle, and that *The L Word* is helping to ensure that it is being taken up, is a clear sign of the “queer tendencies” to which Sasha Roseneil suggests (2000). Gender and sexual binaries and the inequalities embedded within them rely upon stability; these conversations, even as they are impartial and incomplete, illuminate that in the media and everyday life people are shifting the discourse in queer directions.



## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Teaching undergraduates reminds me regularly that media matters. My students constantly use pop culture as a point of reference; when delving into sociological explanations for social problems, they often articulate “problematic” media images as an important source of the problem. Whether or not it is the source of the problem isn’t what I learn from them. What I learn from them is that media is situated in a position of primacy for their lives. This alone clues me in to the importance of media in how individuals come to understand and experience the world.

My students often reference some television show that they love, but are embarrassed to love. We all have a “guilty pleasure” right? The notion of a piece of pop culture as a guilty pleasure harkens back to the arguments in early sociological media research on the difference between high art and pop art, where popular culture is understood as mindless jibber jabber not worthy of much attention. This understanding of popular culture makes clear a history of emphasis on media texts. If I argue that “The Bachelorette”—a “guilty pleasure” of mine this summer—is bad, and is an example of the kind of trash on television that isn’t worth our time and attention, I am saying that because of the concept of the show, and because of the way it frames heterosexual

women. I am saying that it is bad because there is something inherently wrong with the text.

But, is it really all that bad when it also served as a conversation piece, a point of connection, between some of my friends, where we engaged with the plotlines of the show both romantically (who we think *The Bachelorette* should pick) and critically (how it glamorizes hegemonic masculinity). We made fun of ourselves for enjoying the show; we laughed with each other about the “stupid” things the people on the show do (and followed that up with a realization that the producers make things seem real, when they are in fact spliced together). When I focus not on the text, but on the ways that the text gets woven into my interpersonal relationships I see a different story of media.

This story is not about whether or not pop culture is mindless entertainment, whether or not texts are hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, or how audiences’ perceptions of the world are shaped by the hegemonic meanings embedded in the text. Rather, it is a story of how culture is used in everyday life. People use the media in a plethora of ways, many of which have nothing to do with reading the text. Some people use the media as a point of reference in understanding the world. Some people see the media as a place where their story should be told. Some people respond to media texts with changing ideas of sexual desire and orientation. Some people use media texts as a way to write a historical biography of their sexual identity. Some people organize their social lives around mediated events. Some people are so inspired by the media—either through romantic notions or through indignant anger—that it becomes a springboard into social justice work. Some audiences are critical, and concerned about stereotypes and hegemony and ideology. Some audiences just want to get together with their friends and

have a good time. Some audiences do all of these things. If we only look at the text for answers to how the media shapes the social world, we will miss the actual sociality of how people use media in their lives.

### **Bringing Sociology Back In**

Theodor Adorno is often cited as the critical theorist who is one of the founders of media studies. His critical stance argued that mass media is problematic and a-political. He wrote that, “the phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them” (2005:106). He conceptualized the audience of mass media as willingly passive, and argued that in their deception, audiences lost all abilities to be critical thinkers. While Adorno is still well cited in the discipline, and an important member of the canon of media scholarship, audience research has shifted away from a passive stance.

For example, Paul Willis challenged the notion of passivity and an overreliance on the text when he wrote that,

we are interested to explore how far ‘meanings’ and ‘effects’ can change quite decisively according to the social contexts of ‘consumption’, to different kinds of ‘de-coding’ and worked on by different forms of symbolic work and creativity. We want to explore how far grounded aesthetics are part, not of things, but of processes involving consumption, processes which make consumption pleasurable and vital (2005:243).

Relying on a framework that sees media audiences as creative consumers, he helped to develop a more holistically social understanding of the media consumption process. He

makes clear that pleasure doesn't translate into passivity (as Adorno does), and that the meaning of media isn't inherent in the text, but is in the process of consumption. My research builds on the approach of audience research that falls in line with Willis' theorizing, by providing empirical support for such arguments.

My work illuminates that the pleasure in consumption is both individual and social, as audiences use texts in the construction of their identities and in their relationship and community building work. They tell stories that help us frame media away from the problems of texts, and towards the ways that texts get taken up in everyday life, and used by individuals in ways that allow them to come to more "accurate" visions of themselves and the world in which they live. Audiences use the media as a tool; as a resource in seeing more possibilities for themselves, and as a resource in managing their sexualities and their interpersonal relationships in comfortable ways. They develop social languages amongst their friends, relying on media texts as frames. They find solace in their own identities through the stories of others like them on T.V. They make plans with their friends with ease, relying on the media as the foundational ground of such interactions. Their everyday lives—their identities and their relationships—depend heavily on the media. Conversations about the media as "good" versus "bad" are not useful here, and my research pushes sociologists away from such simplistic analysis of media, to more a complex and grounded understanding of the role that media plays in people's lives.

### **Queering Sexuality**

It feels fairly redundant to me to say, at this point, that sexuality is a socially constructed phenomenon. Even as I recognize that biological factors do shape my sexual experiences, they are not wholly determinative. Nor do I understand those biological factors outside of my social context. If I don't orgasm when having sex, my reactions aren't just to ponder the biological factors that might have kept me from coming to orgasm. Likely, I would also consider the social factors involved—stress, pressure, fear, lack of attraction. As Juliet Richters (2006) points out the assumption that sex must culminate in orgasm is itself a social construction, and our reactions emerge from this context.

That we know sexualities are socially constructed is precisely the point where we enter the conversation about sexuality and social justice. Sociological scholarship—and as Stacey and Biblarz (2001) point out, other disciplines such as psychology have a similar bent—has, since the 1970's, largely treated sexualities as an area of study that is useful for expanding our sociological knowledge towards equality, primarily between heterosexuals and homosexuals. The sociology of homosexualities (the predecessor to gay and lesbian studies of the 80's) worked hard to strip away pathological approaches to homosexuality, and towards humanitarian understandings of sexual difference.

The conversation about sexualities happening here is of a different trajectory. Yes, my focus has been to illuminate the constructedness, and thus fluidity of sexualities, and to develop a more clear picture of progressive changes in the sexual arena. However, I looked in some unique places to find this picture of sexuality. Rather than asking people questions about their sex lives, their sexual behaviors, their desires, their beliefs

about the etiology of their sexuality, I asked them about media representations of the GLBT community. What I learned about their sexuality through their reactions to and discussions about media representations, is that individuals do experience, and are often aware of, their sexuality as fluidity; however, it is not necessarily through sexual behaviors that they come to these conclusions.

What I have argued is that GLBT visibility in the media—even when some of those representations are stereotypical—is in fact causing some cracks in the veneer of heterosexual privilege. And, importantly, what I have argued is that heterosexuals are themselves active participants in this change process. One of the hallmarks of heterosexual privilege is a social world that operates around the assumption that individuals are heterosexual. As media watchers engage communally—online and with friends and family—talking about media texts, talking about their lives, identities and experiences, they make clear that such an assumption is problematic. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals insert their own sexualities into the conversations in ways that problematize normative heterosexuality. Gay and lesbian media audiences insert their own narratives into “heterosexual” shows, making clear that they are visible not just on the screen, but in their lives. Heterosexuals respond in these conversations by marking their own heterosexuality, decoupling the relationship between privilege and invisibility.

Queer theorists and sociologists argue that sexuality is fluid, and that bringing understandings of fluid sexuality into everyday life will help disentangle the hetero/homo binary that heterosexual privilege depends upon. What my research shows is that this

process is in fact happening in people's lives. Importantly, I argue that seeing sexuality as fluid does not require shifting objects of sexual desire. For example, a heterosexual who talks about her heterosexuality in queer ways, does not have to acknowledge same-sex desire in order for me, as a scholar, to classify her sexuality as fluid. Many of the heterosexuals in my study talked about their own heterosexuality in both sexual and ideological ways; it is in these ideological conversations that the queer shift in everyday life is most marked. For example, Jackie, a young heterosexual woman argued that she knew for certain she was straight and didn't have same-sex desire. However, she has, after both experiences with GLBT media and the GLBT community, constructed her heterosexual identity around GLBT politics. She has shifted from a taken-for-granted heterosexual identity, to a politically active one, making clear that sexual fluidity comes in many forms, and that queering sexuality does not require same-sex desire.

The queer stories that emerged from my research participants centered around the notion that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not fixed opposites. Gamson and Moon (2004) argue that fixed identity categories are an important component of basic structures of oppression. They go on to argue towards a queer sociological perspective that sees that "sexual identities, desires and categories are fluid and dynamic, and that sexuality is inevitably intertwined with, even sometimes constitutive of, power relations" (49). Moving from this theoretical perspective, to seeing what queer might mean in the real world, I argue that queer changes reflect those that recognize the shifting nature of sexual identities, and that understand in some capacity the power dynamics involved; that is, sexuality isn't taken-for-granted, nor is any particular sexual identity category

presumed to be unitary or coherent. Furthermore, I argue that using a queer perspective in the real world means directly engaging with the power dynamics that are constituted in our identities and social discourses and ideologies.

My participants do not see the world in “gay versus straight” terms; rather, they see the world, because it is what their everyday worlds look like, is gay and straight. The articulate understandings of sexual change, for example, when they allow for the possibility that just because somebody you know now is one orientation label (heterosexual, for example), that doesn’t mean they always will. They realize when talking on-line about sexual representations (gay and straight), that they can’t make assumptions about who they are talking to, nor do they want those assumptions to be made of themselves. Thus, sexual difference becomes both glaringly visible and accepted. Audiences engage with each other on issues of representation and the political import of them, and even where they don’t agree, or come to any conclusions, the stories they tell in the process challenge universal assumptions. All of these dynamics exemplify queer shifts happening on the ground, in everyday lives, and in connection with the media.

Julie D’Acci writes that,

I am confident that those of us who spend time in front of television sets will always interpret programming in creative ways, always produce meanings that escape the confines of the text. I hope, however, we will also continue to analyze television texts and industry practices for the ways they contribute to constraining the representations of gender, sexuality, race, class and ethnicity. And finally, I hope we continue to agitate for a greater representation of difference in all the mass media” (1995:465).



In the conversations that happen amongst my research participants, greater representation of difference does in fact emerge from the media, but not through the media as D'Acci documented women audiences of *Cagney and Lacey* did (1995). While we are in fact seeing more images of differences, those images are also still confining in ways.

However, given the creative ways that media audiences use these images of difference, a less confining story still emerges. When I listened to media audiences, I allowed them to shift my attention away from the text and towards their everyday lives. It was there that difference and changes in the social landscape emerged. The media is a powerful institution, and media texts are taken very seriously by many consumers; micro level analysis of everyday lives, however, that power isn't hoarded within the institution itself, but that individuals' creative uses of media as they construct their identities and negotiate their relationships make clear the power they have to open up new grounds for imagining and experiencing the world.

APPENDIX A:  
PARTICIPANTS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Appendix A:

Participants and Demographic Information

<b>“Name”</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Interview Type</b>
<b>Tracy</b>	25	Female	Lesbian	E-mail
<b>Kasey</b>	40’s	Male	Gay	Focus Group & In-person
<b>Seth</b>	40’s	Male	Gay	E-mail
<b>Michael</b>	49	Male	Gay	E-mail
<b>Stacy</b>	30’s	Female	Lesbian- Bisexual	In-person
<b>Guy</b>	30’s	Male	Gay	E-mail
<b>Sharon</b>	unknown	Female		E-mail
<b>Alex</b>	37	Male	Gay	In-person
<b>Melissa</b>	Unknown	Female	Bisexual	Discussion Forum
<b>Anna</b>	Unknown	Female	Unknown	Discussion Forum
<b>Mark</b>	39	Male	Heterosexual	In-person
<b>Carissa</b>	35	Female	Heterosexual	In-person

<b>Jackie</b>	19	Female	Heterosexual	E-mail
<b>Lisa</b>	31	Female	Heterosexual	E-mail
<b>Mary</b>	22	Female	Heterosexual	E-mail
<b>Lynette</b>	27	Female	Heterosexual	Focus Group & In-person
<b>Holly</b>	33	Female	Heterosexaul	E-mail
<b>Betty</b>	40	Female	Heterosexual	E-mail
<b>Maggie</b>	21	Female	Heterosexual	Focus Group & In-person
<b>Monte</b>	46	Male	Gay	In-person
<b>Reese</b>	unknown	Male	Gay	E-mail
<b>Terry</b>	22	Female	Lesbian	Focus Group & In-person
<b>Tina</b>	26	Female	Lesbian	E-mail
<b>Rick</b>	40	Male	Gay	Focus Group & In-person
<b>Christy</b>	36	Female	Heterosexual	In-person
<b>Lily</b>	35	Female	Heterosexual	In-person
<b>Janis</b>	30's	Female	Heterosexual	In-person
<b>Kimberly</b>	20	Female	Lesbian	Focus Group & In-person

<b>Alyssa</b>	unknown	Female	Bisexual	E-mail
<b>Julie</b>	23	Female	Lesbian	In-person

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## VITA

Monica Edwards got her Masters Degree in Sociology at Illinois State University, and her PhD from Loyola University Chicago. As a Sociologist, her research focus has been on gender, sexuality, media, and social inequalities. She teaches courses in Sociology and Women and Gender Studies, including courses such as *The Sociology of Sex and Gender*, and *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, in addition to *Introduction to Sociology, Marriage and Families*, and the *Sociology of Sexualities*. She is also on the board of Beyond Media Education, a local non-profit organization that works with underserved populations, and encourages people to use media arts as a tool for social justice.

## DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Monica L. Edwards has been read and approved by the following committee:

Talmadge Wright, Ph.D., Director  
Professor of Sociology  
Loyola University Chicago

Judith Wittner, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology  
Loyola University Chicago

Anne Figert, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology  
Loyola University Chicago

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date

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Director's Signature