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POPULAR CULTURE AND QUEER REPRESENTATION
A Critical Perspective

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"Q ueer" is a category in flux. Once a term of homophobic abuse, recently the term has been reappropriated as a marker for some gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (glbt), and other marginalized sexual identities. In addition, "queer theory" has emerged in academic scholarship to identify a body of knowledge connected to but not identical with lesbian/gay studies. The term is itself open-ended, and its advocates argue that its fluidity is to be embraced rather than "fixed." Though there is no consensus on the term's meaning (and who is included and who excluded), there is general agreement that the "queer" is politically radical, rejects binary categories (like heterosexual/homosexual), embraces more fluid categories, and tends to be "universalizing" rather than "minoritizing," to use literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) distinction. That is, queer theory reads queerness throughout the culture and not simply as a fixed, clearly demarcated category. Further, queer theory problematizes certain sorts of questions that have been standard in gay and lesbian theory. Queer theory, for example, tends to be interested less in whether homosexuality is a result of nature or nurture and more in what function the question of causation serves in the culture and in ideology.

Queer theory emerged as one of the many oppositional discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, including postcolonial, feminist, and multicultural

theory. Unlike their earlier theoretical forebears like Marxism and feminism that demanded exclusive theoretical allegiance or hegemony, these theoretical positions remained open to multiple ways of combining perspectives and subverting monocausal explanations for oppression. Indeed, in queer theory and a number of others, hyphenations became common and hybrid theories borrowing from a variety of views promised rich opportunities for analysis. Regardless of their specific differences, these marginalized views sought to move the "margins" to the "center": "This way of seeing affirmed otherness and difference, and the importance of attending to marginalized, minority, and oppositional groups and voices previously excluded from the cultural dialogue" (Kellner, 1995, p. 24). In addition, these theoretical perspectives tended, unlike earlier theoretical approaches to culture like the Frankfurt School, to reject any strict dichotomy between high and low culture and to reject any vision of popular culture that constructed it as monolithic and viewers as passive dupes. The relationship between viewers and cultural artifacts, including popular media, was, according to these postmodern views, more complex, culturally mediated, and open to a mix of possible "readings."

A number of queer theorists have used these foundational principles to analyze media from a queer or non-dominant perspective. Alexander Doty's 1993 book, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, for example, used queer theory to offer new ways to read mainstream television. There he argued that "ghosts," to use his term, inhabited cultural texts and that those ghosts ought to be driven out of their closets. Like Sedgwick, Doty suggested that cultural texts offer the potential for queer readings that focus on connotative rather than denotative meaning, that is, that seek to find credible readings hidden in a text that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from seeing. Though some texts certainly contain explicit themes or characters marked as queer, Doty's concern was to look at "queerness" in acts of production or acts of reception. *Making Things Perfectly Queer* looks especially at same-sex relationships—between Lucy and Ethel, Jack Benny and Rochester, and Laverne and Shirley, to name a few—as offering to viewers a buried, yet undeniable, queer pleasure.

This chapter takes a somewhat different approach from that of Doty. Though I agree with Doty that there is no unambiguous meaning in a cultural text and that the reception positions that audience members occupy are culturally and historically grounded, I want to look at denotation rather than connotation. At the time that Doty wrote his analysis, connotation was about all that queer viewers had available as a source of pleasurable viewing. But today, as the section below points out, prime-time television is rife with gay and lesbian (if not bisexual and transgender) characters offering the potential for new sorts of analysis; that change is significant and has occurred since Doty's work appeared. I want to suggest that this new cultural phenomenon should not be uncritically valorized as an unambiguous symptom of heightened cultural tolerance and inclusion. Rather, while I do not wish to minimize the benefits of such shifts in cultural consciousness, I want in addition to offer somewhat more suspicious readings of these themes and trends.

More specifically, I want to look at three recurring patterns or tropes that I have identified in situation comedies. The first pattern—the increased appearance of glbt major or supporting characters—acknowledges the very real changes that have occurred in the constitution of the characters populating television's worlds. The remaining two tropes—that of the "gay pretender" and that of the "straight-mistaken-for-gay"—have less to do with the actual diversity of characters we see and more with how gayness itself is understood and metaphorized. All three offer the potential for subverting heterosexist norms and assumptions. I shall argue, however,

that how these shows resolve tensions often results in a "reinscription" of heterosexuality and a "containment" of queer sexuality, that is, that the resolution these programs offer enables viewers to distance themselves from the queer and thereby to return to their comfortable positions as part of the dominant culture. Such a dynamic enables power to mask itself, making it all the harder to pin down and question. Thus, where Doty attempts to "queer the straight," my approach suggests how what might seem to be "queer" can come to be normalized in mainstream culture.

In making this argument, I shall rely mostly on feminist and queer theory, and the second section of the essay will outline briefly the conceptual underpinnings of those views on which my analysis depends. It is important to distinguish queer theory as an academic field from the glbt "community" and to acknowledge in this context that gays and lesbians are not a homogeneous group with a singular, uncomplicated sense of identity. The search for identity always occurs on contested terrain and the struggle to find a voice takes place in a dynamic relationship with the dominant culture where signs and signifiers can be appropriated and reappropriated in an endless chain of interpretation. Thus, meaning is rarely predictable and never fixed. Further, queer viewers and readers, however much they resist dominant messages about sexuality, the family, and love, nonetheless are constituted by dominant ideology's messages about these practices. Such readers, then, are neither completely autonomous beings severed from social relations who invent their own readings of texts nor are they completely submerged in social structures, blindly responsive to group norms. As feminist theorist Jacqueline Rose (1986) has noted, "The relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust" (p. 227). Finally, debates within the glbt community remind us that gender, race, class, age, and other variables of identity undermine the homogeneity of any group, including this one.

Given my own theoretical overview, I must insist here that my conclusions can be tentative at best and are meant to suggest more complex ways of reading rather than determinative readings themselves. Thus, I am not suggesting here that I have discovered or deciphered any truth residing below the surface of these popular texts. Indeed, this essay will be successful if it enriches my readers' abilities to create meanings different from my own suggested ones in the popular cultural texts they read. Further, given the truism that no social group is homogeneous and that even a single individual occupies multiple subject positions, I in no way mean to imply that my readings here are "queer," generalizable to any particular group or sort of person, or noncontroversial. To put the point more simply, there is no "correct" queer reading, no one queer reading, and no unchanging queer perspective.

This chapter does not take issue with the claim that the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians in the media has important direct and indirect positive effects, not least of which has been the new availability of role models and cultural icons for younger glbt people, the attention to homophobia and hate crime, the growing recognition of demands for civil rights for glbt people, and the public's seeming greater comfort with "out" glbt celebrities. Having acknowledged such changes, I want move beyond them here to complexify the issue of representation, more specifically the representation of glbt people in a period in which gays and lesbians (if not bisexuals and transgendered individuals) seem to be everywhere in the media—situation comedies, dramas, *People* magazine, *MTV*, even the hit reality show *Survivor*.

Despite the occasional mention of a drama, my focus here is on comedy, the arena where images of glbt people appear most frequently. To attempt to explain in any persuasive way why such is the case would take me far from my topic. But

I might briefly conjecture two possible explanations. First, as traditional family comedies—along with the traditional family—began to disappear, space opened up for "alternative" sorts of narratives, including those of nontraditional "families" (e.g., *Friends*, *Designing Women,* and the vast number of workplace comedies whose origins lie in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*); even so-called "family" shows like, for example, *Party of Five* diverge from the traditional model. With the gradual disappearance of the traditional family sitcom, even heterosexual characters began to occupy nonnormative narrative positions. For example, the oldest son in *Party of Five* becomes a surrogate father *and* mother to his younger siblings; married characters on popular shows like *Mary Tyler Moore* get divorced; in some cases married characters are never seen with their spouses; and holidays like Thanksgiving, traditionally constructed as times for "family," get reconstructed on shows like *Friends*. These shifts in roles and viewer expectations clearly allowed for the appearance of nonheterosexual characters in major and supporting roles; cultural shifts linked to an increasingly visible gay and lesbian movement no doubt helped to buttress such changes. Finally, situation comedies—however "realistic" they might be—do not claim, like dramas, to be offering us "real life." That lack of seriousness may allow these programs to play with themes under cover of humor where those themes might be too volatile or even too didactic for another sort of audience. Such play and flexibility may also help to account for what may be a wider variety of possible readings. I want now to turn to an overview of those representations.

◆ The Queering of Television

Until very recently, it was not unusual for glbt activists and scholars to bemoan their virtual absence in popular media, particularly television. For example, in 1995, Larry Gross used the term "symbolic annihilation" (p. 62) to describe the invisibility of gays and lesbians in mass media; if, as Gross suggested, representation attaches to power, then that invisibility evidences the powerlessness of the queer community. Even media studies sensitive to portrayals of "minorities in the media" (e.g., Greenberg, 1986) tended to focus mostly on ethnic and racial minorities and to ignore sexual orientation as a defining aspect of identity. According to Gross, gays and lesbians tend to be even more isolated and invisible than members of racial and ethnic minorities and are therefore "probably the least permitted to speak for ourselves in the mass media" (p. 63).

Finally, media critics pointed out that those rare depictions of glbt people tended both to dichotomize anyone glbt as victim or villain and to reinforce demeaning stereotypes and caricatures: gay men as effeminate and lesbians as unattractive man-haters, for example. According to Gross (1995), "Hardly ever shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles which do not center on their deviance as a threat to the moral order which must be countered through ridicule or physical violence" (p. 65). An underlying assumption of such an apparently commonsensical critique is not only that more images of marginalized peoples will effect social transformation but also that the notion of a "positive" image—"just plain gay folks"—is uncontroversial and transparent.

Today's even casual television viewers, however, would find such critiques oddly out-of-date. Network programs are now full of gay/queer characters; indeed, the more-than-occasional prime-time television viewer would likely be mystified by Gross's (1995) claim that the rare continuing gay character "tend[s] to be so subtle as to be readily misunderstood by the innocent" (p. 66). Forty-two million people watched the coming-out episode on *Ellen* on April 30, 1997, making it the highest-ranked

show on television that year except for the Academy Awards. Though some argue that Ellen DeGeneres's sexuality led to the cancellation of her show in 1998, the queering of prime-time television since that time is without dispute.[1]

A recent *Boston Globe* article notes there are at least two dozen gay television characters scattered throughout prime-time shows (Rothaus, 2000). Where once soap operas floated gay characters only to have them die of AIDS or leave town mysteriously, *All My Children* has introduced a new plot line in which a character who has grown up on the show comes out as a lesbian. According to the actress who plays the character, the story-line—about how an almost obsessively heterosexual mother deals with her daughter's lesbianism—is meant to be "accessible to everyone" (Rothaus, 2000) and, though allegedly not didactic, makes a "concerted effort to show that a gay relationship is just like any other" (Rothaus, 2000).[2] *Will and Grace*, two of whose four major characters are openly gay, is one of the most popular shows on television. Indeed, one might argue that television is light years ahead of mainstream film, whose "gay" characters still seem to be confined to psychopathic murderers (e.g., *Basic Instinct*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Brave-heart*, *JFK*, *American Beauty*, etc.) or lonely, asexual best friends (e.g., *Silkwood, As Good as it Gets*, etc.);[3] for the most part, one needs to turn to independent films to see the "just plain gay folks" Gross seeks.

Where once glbt characters were the "exemplar of degeneracy" (Mohr, 1997, p. 331), today's gay characters are "queer as folk," to borrow the title of one continuing cable television program. Given that the majority viewing audience is heterosexual, programming sympathetic to glbt communities must appeal to mainstream liberal viewers who today most likely know someone gay in the workplace, the family, or among friends.[4] Thus, where once glbt viewers had to resort to oppositional or subversive readings like Doty's in order to

find viewing pleasure—are Cagney and Lacey really lovers? Can one find a queer resonance in the films of Rock Hudson? and so forth—such readings seem quaint and tame by today's television standards when gayness is much discussed, gay sexual practices are the subject of comedic banter, and a range of appealing characters are openly gay or lesbian.

Albeit somewhat one-dimensional, these gay or lesbian television characters are attractive and professional—Will Truman is a lawyer, and the lesbians on *Friends* and the now-defunct but highly popular *Mad About You* are doctors, accountants, and mothers. They include younger characters—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has featured two teenaged girls in a budding lesbian relationship, and *Dawson's Creek* featured a main character's coming out in its story line. They are occasionally people of color—*Spin City* includes an African American gay man as part of the political team. Viewers have seen lesbian weddings, lesbian and gay parenting arrangements, gay therapists, gay seniors, and the angst and humor of coming out. Such "mainstreaming" seems likely to change popular perceptions and misperceptions about homosexuality. As Mohr points out, "Without demonization, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to conceptualize homosexuality as a vampire-like corruptive contagion, a disease that spreads itself to the pure and innocent by mere proximity" (p. 333).

Though there is no question that the majority of the viewing audience for these shows is heterosexual, these portrayals engage with viewers who see themselves as hip, nonjudgmental, mostly urban, and gay-friendly. *Will and Grace* is full of campy in-jokes (many referring back to popular culture itself) and sexual innuendo, and as viewers we are asked to feel superior to Jack's mother who fails to realize that he is gay. *Saturday Night Live* pokes fun at a Batman-and-Robin-like team of super-heroes, the Ambiguously Gay Duo, in animated sketches full of phallic imagery and less-than-subtle references to anal

intercourse. Smithers is clearly smitten with (and even has erotic dreams about) Mr. Burns in *The Simpsons* and in one episode gay director John Waters is the voice of an antique dealer Homer idolizes until he discovers that the dealer is gay. We are amused that Jaimie's impossible-to-please mother-in-law in *Mad About You* prefers her lesbian daughter's lover to Jaimie. The stars of *Xena* discuss without defensiveness in mainstream periodicals the "lesbian subtext" of that long-running series. It is now homophobes, not gays and lesbians, who are vilified or ignored, and often test of a character (e.g., the gay plotline in *Dawson's Creek*) comes down to how well he or she deals with a friend or family member's coming out.

This "queering" of television goes well beyond the presence of glbt characters. A recent *New York Times* article references the growing number of gay television writers who are influencing shows even where there are no gay characters. The article suggests that "a gay sensibility has infiltrated American comedy, even when flying beneath the radar in an ostensibly heterosexual situation" (Kirby, 2001, p. 23). This phenomenon—sometimes termed "gay winking" or "gay vague"—allows for multiple readings of a character or situation, those readings dependent on the subject position of the viewer. Thus, *Frasier*'s two brothers, but for the fact that they sleep with women, are stereotypically gay in their tastes and preferences; knowing more about Puccini than basketball, these brothers evidence a gay sensibility striking to all but the most naïve. Indeed, much of the humor emerges from their macho-cop father's vain attempts to make his sons more "butch." Further, Niles and Frasier's shared memories of the childhood trauma they experienced as a result of being fussy, intelligent, artistic, and averse to athletics resonate with the experiences of many glbt people who did not as youths conform to the dominant culture's gender codes.

These more subtle gestures may, as Danae Clark (1993) suggests in her discussion of advertising campaigns, serve a dual function: They avoid alienating gay audiences at the same time that they mask the gay content and retain majority viewers. Finally, in a number of cases, actors playing heterosexual characters are known to viewing audiences to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. For example, David Hyde Pierce, who plays Frasier's brother Niles Crane, is openly gay; knowledgeable viewers, then, can play with multiple levels of reading performances such as Pierce's, even where the ostensible plot line involves, for example, his long-term obsession with Daphne, his father's live-in physical therapist.

Thus, queer images, themes, and tropes are now in circulation in a way that marks this particular period as distinct from earlier eras where homosexuality could only be hinted at or, if explicit, pathologized. Now that, as Mohr puts it, queer folks "are no longer something monstrous, repulsive, unthinkably abject" (p. 333), how do these new images function in popular discourse? Though cultural studies critics have tended to look for so-called subversive moments in television and film as opportunities for resistant readings, my approach here adopts a different orientation to suggest how moments of apparently subversive potential are undermined and ultimately contained. Recent queer and feminist theory offers new ways of thinking about such dynamics.

Queering Theory ◆ and Representation

Ideology, as cultural studies theorists have persuasively argued, constructs viewing positions and identities. Sexuality, at least in modern times, is one component of that ideology, a component whose regulation occurs both formally and informally. In a culture grounded in what Adrienne Rich (1980) has termed "compulsory heterosexuality," popular culture will tend to portray heterosexuality as if it were natural and

inevitable and to position alternative forms of sexuality as "other." Compulsory heterosexuality (or what some have called "heteronormativity") functions to underline the fact that heterosexuality is an institution, a practice, with its own set of expectations, norms, and principles of conduct. If, however, heterosexuality is not a naturalized, innate state of being, then its existence is more fragile than is obvious at first glance. Given that fragility, heterosexuality cannot be taken as a given or presumed; in a culture framed by homophobia and heterosexism, institutions both formal and informal; police behavior, boundaries, expectations, and values; a dynamic blend of incentives and disincentives function to channel desire in "appropriate" ways and to make invisible those practices falling outside its discursive domain.

Heterosexuality and homophobia organize the structures in which we are immersed, structures so pervasive as to become almost invisible. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has employed the notion of *habitus* to describe how what is constructed can come to seem inevitable and natural. Like the fish that does not feel the weight of the water, human beings live in a world of "social games embodied and turned into second nature" (p. 63). Indeed, the very fact that our culture organizes itself around sexuality and that sexuality is defined in terms of the sex of one's object of desire is noteworthy. As Sedgwick (1990) conjectures, one can, with a bit of imagination, conceive any number of ways to organize sexual identity, including "preference[s] for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc." (p. 8). Finally, the cultural energy involved in disciplining gender and sexuality suggests how fragile those institutions actually are; if Butler and Foucault are right that gender and sexuality are *achievements* rather than givens, then sexual identity is complex, incomplete, and unstable.

The mechanisms that serve to construct and regulate sexuality may not be obvious or even intentional; indeed, as Foucault (1990) puts it, "Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (p. 86). If ideology generally effaces itself, then even the very producers of popular culture—whatever their explicit political leanings, sexuality, or agenda—are immersed in that ideology. Further, power's ability to mask itself may mean that, ironically, the mechanisms of power produce pleasure. We don't have to go far to find such examples—Gothic romances, pornography, certain clothing styles, exercise regimens, gendered toys for children, and so forth—all function to produce pleasure as they disguise the ways that they reinforce norms relating to sexuality and sexuality and, less obviously, race, age, and class. The question becomes, then, not whether queer (or straight) viewers find pleasure in the proliferation of these television images (they would not endure if they did not produce pleasure) but rather how one might read and understand such pleasure. Pleasure itself is never innocent or neutral and there is a danger in valorizing pleasure without looking at its context. Given that, I want to ask how the new representations of gays and lesbians circulate in culture.

If the homo/hetero schema is "written into the cultural organization of Western societies" (Epstein, 1987, p. 133), then the question of the homosexual/heterosexual matrix rather than the question of personal identity becomes primary. Such a perspective would suggest that what is at stake is less the question how many gay/queer characters populate television or even how sympathetically they are portrayed but rather about the ways desire and meaning are structured, even in the absence of such images. Thus, identity must be thought of as always in relation, never fixed or stable. As Fuss, Sedgwick, Butler, and others have noted, heterosexuality is a parasitic notion, dependent on that-what-it-is-not, namely,

homosexuality. "Each is haunted by the other" (Fuss, 1991, p. 4), and the homosexual comes to represent the "terrifying [sexual] other" of the heterosexual. Yet popular television programming seems to belie this theoretical claim, bombarding us with images of gayness and far less threatening homosexuals who suggest the possibility of new normative understandings of sexual difference.

First, one should note that the appearance of *difference* per se is not necessarily subversive. As bell hooks (1999) points out in her essay "Eating the Other," the commodification of difference can have the effect of silencing resistance and transforming resistance to consumption. Without a mutual recognition of the role that homophobia plays in these dynamics, "boundaries [ ] remain intact" (p. 186). That heterosexuals now can, like tourists, visit glbt culture does not in itself guarantee social change. Further, capitalist systems need difference to create desire and to sell commodities. Kellner (1995) notes:

> Difference sells. Capitalism must constantly multiply markets, styles, fads, and artifacts to keep absorbing consumers into its practices and lifestyles. The mere valorization of "difference" as a mark of opposition can simply help market new styles and artifacts if the difference in question and its effects are not adequately appraised. (p. 40)

Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen (1992) are right that "novelty and disposability make up the backbone of the market" (p. 193), then the static is the enemy of popular media. Difference can also serve to provide one with a sense of uniqueness or individuality. As Jonathan Rutherford has quipped, "It's no longer about keeping up with the Joneses, it's about being different from them" (quoted in hooks, 1995, p. 157). Further, the promotion of gayness as a "lifestyle" tends to attach it to commodities rather than practices as an expression of the self. *Will and Grace*'s bitchy attention to

fashion, weight, career, and popular media is exemplary in this respect.[5]

In addition, Torres (1993) points to the ways visits from "real lesbians" may help to deflect the viewer's attention from the possibility that ongoing characters may harbor same-sex feelings. Especially in shows that feature all, or mostly, female troupes like *Kate and Allie*, *Designing Women*, *Cagney and Lacey*, and *Golden Girls*, for example, the introduction of lesbian and gay characters may serve to reassure viewers that the same-sex groupings are purely platonic. Cultural unease with lesbianism may be tied to cultural unease with feminism, but it may also emerge from lesbianism's own murky boundaries. Obviously, my case would be much easier to make if these characters reflected negative or insulting stereotypes; yet, I have already suggested that the characters we see exhibit a range of personality types, interests, values, and flaws. But I want to look more closely for a moment at a dynamic in *Will and Grace* that may help to clarify how the subversive potential in these images is ultimately policed and contained.

IT'S NOT JUST THE NUMBERS . . .

The dynamic I want to explore pervades this show, and its repetition suggests a certain ambivalence over sexuality, queer sexuality in particular. To illustrate this phenomenon more concretely, let's look at the montage that opens the show. In these brief scenes, we see the show's four main characters in a variety of poses and places. Yet, strikingly, we never see the two gay men together and the only times we see the women together occur when they are with at least one of the men. Instead, we are treated to a number of opposite-sex couplings. We see, in the first clip, Will and Grace dancing a tango, a dance which has come to epitomize sexual heat and romance. We see Jack and Karen frequently together in other scenes, including one where they bounce off each other's chests

and another where they hug. In episodes of the show, we frequently see Will and Grace in bed together and, though Grace recently had and lost a boyfriend, Will's relationships are rare and end almost as soon as they begin. Will and Grace's behavior mirrors that of a traditional heterosexual husband and wife, and Karen is quick to point to Grace's neurotic attachment to Will (indeed, she often refers to Will as Grace's gay husband). Grace becomes the supremely neurotic fag hag par excellence who identifies with gay culture, surrounds herself with gay men, and is never guilty of even the mildest expression of homophobia. Will and Grace are comfortable physically with one another, they finish each other's sentences, and, though they briefly lived apart (across the hall from one another!), they soon came back together as roommates. Do we, like Grace, hope someday that the two will be united, that Will can be converted to the heterosexual partner that Grace desperately wants? Further, Jack's flamboyance and his stereotypical nature may suggest that Will is somehow less gay and therefore recuperable to heterosexuality.

As already noted, there is no question that the new glbt characters we see on television are an attractive group both morally and physically. In some cases, for example, *ER* and *Buffy*, shows allow a long-standing character to play with a same-sex attraction, even if the feelings/relationships are temporary. The famous "kisses"—one thinks back to the *Roseanne* show for one of the first—and the more recent kisses on *Friends* and *Ally McBeal*—occur during sweeps weeks and are unabashed strategies to increase the viewing audience. The fact that these episodes earn viewer warnings is noteworthy in itself. But even more noteworthy, it seems to me, is the fact that these episodes result in no change in diegesis or character evolution. These kisses come and go as if they were a dream; they are never incorporated into a character's understanding of his/her identity and sexuality, and the possibility of bisexuality,

a more fluid sexual identity, or even a recurrence is rarely if ever entertained.

Indeed, fluidity seems to pose such a threat that its possibility is rarely if ever acknowledged. Thus, when "real" gay or lesbian characters tell their stories, their narratives tend almost always to reinscribe gayness as innate, and those who are gay as having no choice. Thus, we hear that Will has always loved Grace, but that he has never had any sexual feelings of any kind for her. When she is devastated to learn that he has had sex with another woman, he insists that it was merely to have the experience and that he had no real interest in the woman. The idea that Will's best friend Jack might have been attracted to a woman is so obviously ludicrous that the very idea earns a huge laugh. The noteworthy absence of bisexuals in these comedies suggests that the fluidity of a bisexual sexual identity may be too disruptive for such programming. In that sense, bisexuals may be television's abject subjects, in the Butlerian sense that they are unthinkable and/or unnameable, not even subjects in discourse (1993). To be explicitly prohibited permits the possibility of a "reverse discourse," but to be "implicitly proscribed is not even to qualify as an object of prohibition" (p. 312). Finally, these deterministic narratives also tend to privilege gay men's perspectives who, far more than lesbians, tend to recount their sexual histories as inevitable, predetermined, and innate (Whisman, 1996). One possible exception is Ross's ex-wife Susan, who falls in love with a woman and leaves Ross for her. Yet the show's narrative consistently teases Ross for having married a lesbian, thus occluding the possibility that Susan is *either* bisexual or that she was heterosexual while married and later chose or became a lesbian.

Finally, an important strategy for learning to read popular texts like television sitcoms is to look for those moments where a moral voice seems to speak. Because these shows, as mentioned earlier, are meant to be light and entertaining, they cannot afford to be overly didactic. But there is no

question that moral ideology permeates these shows. In some cases, it is certain characters who seem to represent the voice of moral authority. In *Will and Grace* that character seems to be Grace, who, despite her ditziness, often seems to be the moral voice of the show. As mentioned above, Grace's total absence of any vestiges of homophobia makes her a kind of model for the heterosexual viewer. Karen, though also heterosexual, is far too over-the-edge and campy for viewers to identify with. In contrast, Grace is a dependable friend, a creative and dedicated professional, and enemy of oppression. In one episode, Grace is horrified to discover that Jack is not out to his mother. She urges him to come out and emphasizes the importance of being honest about his identity. In another episode, for example, Grace refuses to speak to Will because he is willing to date someone who is in the closet. Grace repeatedly pushes on this issue and accuses Will of hypocrisy and self-loathing. The fact that the heterosexual woman on the show is the one to insist on being openly gay is itself worth noting. Even more striking, however, is the fact that the narrative vilifies those glbt people who, for a variety of powerful reasons, decide not to come out. Never acknowledging any costs to being openly gay, the moral message seems to be that all secrets are bad and the decision to stay in the closet is just another secret that one is never justified in keeping. Questions of power and subordination are thereby erased in the effort to homogenize all lies and secrets. Indeed, once Jack does tell his mother that he is gay, she immediately responds, "I have a secret too." The momentum switches away from Jack's confession and its possible implications to her announcement that the man Jack's biological father is not who he thinks he is.

PRETENDING TO BE GAY . . .

My second theme, the trope of the gay pretender, has been a staple of situation comedies ever since Jack Tripper in *Three's Company* posed as gay so that his uptight landlord would let him live with two attractive women. While it may not have been the *modus operandi* of an entire show (as in *Three's Company*), it has been used repeatedly. Martin, Frasier's dad, poses as gay in order to avoid having to date a woman he's not interested in. Kate and Allie in that long-defunct series, pose as lesbians in order to curry favor (and a new lease) from their lesbian landladies. In *Three Sisters*, one sister's ex-husband convinced her that he was gay in order to get a quickie divorce. Klinger in *M.A.S.H.* was, we assume as viewers, a heterosexual man posing as gay or transvestite in order to secure a release from the military. Finally, and most recently, the soap opera *Days of Our Lives* introduced a new plotline where Jack "outs" himself to Greta so as not to hurt her feelings and confess that he is not attracted to her.

Readers no doubt will be able to come up with examples of their own, and the ease with which we are able to produce these examples suggests how common this trope is. How might one explain its recurrence? On the one hand, one reading suggests that these examples of gender and sexuality play may be consistent with a progressive queer agenda that suggests either that we're all queer or that there's a little queer in each of us. Sedgwick labels this approach to sexuality a "universalizing discourse," meaning that it views queerness/sexuality as non-binary and more amorphous than is traditionally believed. Though one might read the gay pretender trope along these lines, such a reading, I suggest, is possible yet unpersuasive. What makes for the humor in these situations is, at least partly, the fact that the viewers knows that the character 's heterosexuality is never in doubt. Such certainty enables these characters to play with gay stereotypes without seeming to be homophobic—in *Frasier*, for example, Martin suddenly becomes limp-wristed, interested in décor, and able to express his emotions. Certain mannerisms come to be

coded as gay even though the character expressing them is not. The character we "know" is straight is positioned against the character we "know" is gay (interestingly, this trope seems to be rarely used with female characters; does this suggest that lesbians have fewer identifiable mannerisms?) and the comedy of errors and misreadings ensues.

Yet there is never any suggestion whatsoever of any temptation or questioning on the part of the "straight" character; that firmness of resolve serves once again not only to reinforce a strict binary of gay/straight but also to suggest that solid and impermeable boundaries frame one's sexuality. Thus, potentially oppositional discourses are subverted by naturalizing them within terms that make sense in the context of the dominant perspective.

In addition, the "gay pretender" trope implicitly creates a fantasy world where not only do gays and lesbians not experience cultural ostracism and legal discrimination; they also enjoy *more* power than hetero-sexuals. In addition, it is striking that sex and sexuality seem to be foregrounded in these dynamics. They are landlords who favor "their own kind"; they are released from the burdens of heterosexual dating and romance (and, indeed from having to tell the truth!); they do not have to serve in the military; and they are simply able to have more fun, as Karen in *Will and Grace* discovers, when posing as a lesbian enables her to offer make-up tips and kiss cute women. This inversion results in humor and unanticipated consequences but it may also serve to mask the ways that power operates and to make the mechanisms of power even more covert.

I'M NOT GAY BUT MY BOYFRIEND IS . . .

Finally, the "straight-mistaken-for-gay" trope is common throughout comedy. This trope represents an almost total inversion of the tendency in earlier television

audiences to ignore telltale signs of gayness if a television character or actor. To the less naïve viewer today, the flamboyance and campiness of a Liberace, Flip Wilson, or PeeWee Herman suggest a gay sensibility too obvious to be overlooked. But today's situation comedies manipulate signs of gayness to create humor and playfulness. For example, in a now-classic *Seinfeld* episode, Jerry and George are mistakenly identified as a gay couple by a college reporter who then outs them in her school newspaper. The refrain "not that there's anything wrong with it" serves in part to mock standard liberal attitudes toward homosexuality. Even when Jerry finally ends up dating the reporter, she continues to have doubts about his sexuality. This particular episode also borrows from the gay pretender trope, as George, desperately wanting to break up with a woman he's seeing, finally decides to use this misunderstanding as an opportunity to extract himself from the relationship. In *Third Rock From the Sun*, John Lithgow attempts to "come out" as an alien and is instead assumed to be coming out as gay. *Friends* often hints at the ways Chandler's affect positions him as gay. Again, this trope might serve to undermine essentialist notions of a clear boundary between hetero- and homosexual identity. Indeed, part of the humor in these episodes is that the heterosexual character's mannerisms come to be recoded as queer. Further, this trope suggests the ways that virtually any behavior can be reread as gay once the viewer's perspective is framed by that lens.

The "straight-mistaken-for-gay" trope, like the gay pretender, derives much of its humor from the audience's knowledge that the character(s) in question is/are *not* in fact gay. Such an epistemological advantage sets the audience member apart from the mistaken character and provides the audience member not only with a certain degree of distance but also with reinscribed boundaries between the gay and the straight. If we ever wondered, for example, whether Jerry and George were even vaguely attracted to each other, our identification with them

and not with the mistaken reporter ensures that we leave with no doubt whatsoever. In this context, it is perhaps significant that Chandler in *Friends* is the first character to "truly" fall in love and marry. Further, viewers are explicitly told that his "cold feet" prior to the marriage result directly from his fear of commitment and not from any vestiges of bi- or homosexuality. *Third Rock*'s mistaken-gay episode teaches everyone that there is a little alien in each of us but not that the character himself might be gay.

Further, both the gay pretender and the mistaken gay tropes seem to give these programs permission to play with sex and sexuality more explicitly than they might with a heterosexual characters. The use of double entendre in these scenes of misunderstanding is one strategy that opens up and foregrounds the sexual aspects of homosexuality. So, for example, a scene from *Days of Our Lives* allows its generally more buttoned-down characters to joke obliquely about penis size: Harold, who *is* gay, is coming on to Jack, who is pretending but is not gay. Greta, their mutual friend, accuses Harold of having a big ego. Jack, innocently, says, "It's not how big your ego is. It's what you do with it." Harold, who assumes that Jack is playing with him, finds this banter incredibly erotic. Moments later, Jack returns to this theme when he informs them both (still referring, he believes, back to "ego") that "size doesn't matter." Harold is totally charmed, but two conversations and not one have taken place. Such dialogue is all the more significant when one remembers that the character of Jack is one that has been part of the show off-and-on for over twenty years. It is only when he is "playing gay" that we have access to an erotic side of him that the culture links with gay male sexuality.

Queer theory embraces a kind of intellectual tension: where, on the one hand, the viewer insists that sexuality and the domain of the sexual are cultural inventions and not essential, on the other hand, it deploys

sexuality as a (if not *the*) significant determinant of cultural and individual identity. If Doty (1993) is right that queerness should "challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (p. xvii), then the sorts of examples I've been describing and analyzing here represent failures.

Marginalized identities are not just oppressed by power; they are also, as Foucault points out, constructed by those very same power relations. Thus, there is no doubt that these new representations of glbt characters and of heterosexuality will give birth to new meanings and new signifiers attached to queer sexuality. But we must wait for that next episode.

Notes ◆

1. Indeed, fall 2001 premiered a new show starring DeGeneres, who plays an out lesbian who returns to her hometown. Unlike her earlier show, where it took years and much publicity for her to out herself, in this new show she is already out in the first episode and her sexuality is treated casually by her family and those she meets.

2. I cannot help but wonder about this phenomenon in light of the increasing *in*visibility of race in popular media. Timothy Simone (1989) has noted the "increasingly clandestine" (p. 10) presence of race concepts. As the language of popular culture is increasingly "cleansed of overt racial reference" (p. 17), queer folks have become the latest "other."

3. Unless the film deals explicitly with "gay issues" like AIDS *(Philadelphia*, *Long Time Companion*, etc.) or homophobic violence (e.g., *Boys Don't Cry*).

4. Gross (1995) suggests that misinformation and homophobic stereotyping in the media are connected to most heterosexual people's lack of first-hand knowledge of gays and lesbians. I'm not sure that was true ten years ago, but it certainly seems not to be the case today.

5. Note too how this dynamic functions to efface the element of class. Thus, it is not surprising that Rosario, Karen's third-world main, serves as the butt of much of the show's humor.

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