

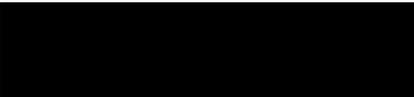
Desiring Discourse: Validating Queer Female Existence  
on American Primetime Television

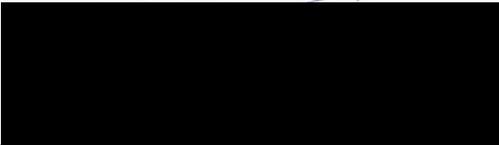
By

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## ABSTRACT:

Until 1975, the American Psychological Association considered homosexuality a mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the attitude toward LGBT citizens has been slowly shifting. We cannot deny the fact that there is still a struggle for basic, civil rights. Today, marriage equality is a hotly contested issue. Though American society has made several progressive steps, in a relatively short period of time, lingering inequalities infect our population's attitude toward LGBT Americans.

It can be argued that this issue stems from the social construction of gender and heterosexuality. Society adheres to certain cultural inscriptions that create binaries and implement guidelines for how men and women should act. This creates a heteronormative hegemony that severely affects the way LGBT individuals are treated. Society's attitude places women and homosexuality into categories as social minorities, despite women's numerical majority. Several forms of media constantly demonstrate these ideas, further engraining them into our minds. The media is a notorious perpetrator of this regulation. Television is a highly consumed commodity and its treatment of minority groups, especially women and LGBT citizens, has been far from true.

As a self-identified lesbian, I assert that our voice is the most effective tool we have in activism. We must work toward creating a new discourse that challenges the current social script; one that affirms female same sex sexuality. My research is focused on how queer affirmative language should be distributed among a wide range of demographics, specifically within the context of American primetime broadcast network television.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, R.E. (1988). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1987: Minutes of the Annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist*, 43, 508-531.

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## **I. The Social Construction of Queer Female Deviance and How We Perceive It**

According to societal standards of normalcy, queer women are considered outsiders for more than one reason. Association within the female gender automatically defines her as a deviant construction by the patriarchal context that frames gender expression. This is partially caused by a social script, or discourse, that supports viewing gender within a binary. There are men, there are women, they both have specific roles, any characteristics outside of that designation is decidedly wrong. Female characteristics include submission to the male gender; if she does not submit, she is considered a threat to the patriarchal status quo. This dates back to biblical times; the female gender being codified as evil since the writing of the Old Testament. The creation of Eve as a temptress and her subsequent responsibility for the fall of man has vilified women and determined the need for gender regulation.

Judged by the same standards, a woman who experiences same sex desire is doubly deviant. Queer women upset the heteronormative status quo, effectively compromising a woman's need for man's existence. Because of this, female same sex sexuality was virtually invisible in the media; not taken seriously enough to warrant representation that would accept or promote its existence. When queer women began to make appearances in media, specifically television, the group was vilified as sick criminals or served as a source of desire for heterosexual males (Gross, 2001).

As a queer female writer, I argue that televised, negative images of queer women (or the lack thereof) are detrimental to developing a social discourse that supports female same sex sexuality. These unfavorable depictions support the idea of queer women as degenerates; beings that are less than human. It is my firm belief that television writers (and writers of all other

media, for that matter) have a responsibility to help shape the American population's perception of minority groups. We are living in a time still pervaded by social injustice; queer women acting as a constant target in the present time. Writers are not ultimately responsible for the creation of public perception, but they hold the power to create a new discourse that can help change the discussion toward the benefit of normalizing the ostracized. Our culture is at the beginning of a shift in the societal attitude toward queer women; televised imagery needs to continue reflecting this change and support the validation of female same-sex sexuality.

## **II. The Significance of Television as a Highly Consumed Commodity:**

In a relatively short time period, television has proliferated into an easily accessible commodity. On the consumption of it, Larry Gross (2001) states:

Daily television viewing per household has risen steadily from four and one half hours in 1950, when only few had TV's, to more than seven hours since the early 1980's, when nearly everyone had at least one. By 1986, 57 percent of US households had two or more TVs; in 1999, 64 percent of American teenagers had TV sets in their room. (p. 2)

In recent years, these numbers have further risen. This has been assisted by the distribution of television through the internet/smart phones and the arrival of digital video recorders. It has become apparent that television is consumed daily and in abundance, unparalleled in years past.

Television is often a reflection of its largest demographics. It is important to see all people, including minority groups, represented on screen; it becomes noticeable if certain demographics are not present. Underrepresentation can create damaging effects on the viewing audience. It has been speculated that young adults are most susceptible to emulating televised practices of gendered behavior. Gerbner's Social Indicators project found a correlation between the amount of television watched and the behavior exhibited by those watching. He states that "when TV depictions are perceived by the viewer as similar to their standard everyday reality, the TV message is amplified, creating a more powerful and influential suggestion" (as cited in Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 21). While this may not apply to all, the fact remains that cultural

perceptions can be molded by what's available on television. This is particularly relevant to younger, impressionable generations.

However, much representation of minority groups, particularly queer women, is guided by the people in power. Very few of those people classify as a minority. This is reflected within the material presented by networks. In *Up From Invisibility*, Larry Gross (2001) succinctly posits:

When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda. And these are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual (at least in public). (p. 4)

How does queer female visibility affect the white, straight male? It creates the question of why the representational majority should cater to a demographic to which they cannot necessarily relate. Such questions are precisely the issue in a society that uses television as a form of communication. A serious lack of representation for queer women runs the risk of further devaluing the group from societal standards (Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 21).

### III. Choosing Primetime Broadcast Television

Historically, there is no question that the treatment of homosexuality across all media platforms has been problematic. In “What is Wrong With This Picture? Lesbians and Gay Men on Television,” included in Ringer’s *Queer Words, Queer Images* anthology, Larry Gross argues that this truth for film, applies more so to television consumption. He invokes Vito Russo’s pioneering study *The Celluloid Closet*, which posits: “homosexuality is no longer in the closet either on or off screen...it is also true that mainstream cinema is incapable of giving to members of any minority the kinds of films that truly touch their lives and experiences...Mainstream films about homosexuality are not for gays. They address themselves exclusively to the majority” (as cited on p. 152). Gross takes Russo’s argument and asserts that it can apply to television, suggesting that it is at higher risk for this treatment than film (p. 152).

The greater restrictions imposed upon networks, the steep cost of production and the need to secure broad demographics determine the unsympathetic, questionable representation of minority groups in television. This makes it an interesting choice for analysis, especially when looking specifically at primetime broadcast networks.

I will concede that there is much to be said about the power of film. It is a more communal experience; by virtue of the fact that it is consumed primarily in a large group per each viewing. Each member is individually affected by the character and his/her actions. They have the ability to accept or reject representation at the time of viewing, often creating an emotionally visceral experience. However, I would like to argue that film often exists as fixed

and independent moments in time. This is even truer of films that function as a series; the formula is most likely to remain the same in each incarnation of the franchise.

In comparison, television is an on-going process; fictional worlds are created that must be maintained and spread out over several seasons. This allows for constant character development; we become attached as we watch the character grow. Additionally, a new aspect of this character is introduced each week, retaining a constant presence in the life of the viewer. I feel that this can be a profound experience, especially in the case of queer women. To see someone that reflects an underrepresented social group, every week, is important to solidifying queer existence in daily life.

In the prior chapter, I touched upon the idea that we are living in an era of smart technology. Entertainment has become readily available, anytime, right in the palms of our hands, in the form of smart phones, tablets, etc. An astounding number of people, ranging from children to adults, own such devices. Several broadcast and cable networks have made their content available for online streaming, allowing for easy access to the material. Primetime television shows are distributed in several ways: during broadcast, online or as boxed sets of DVD's.

Prime time is traditionally defined as anything shown between the hours of 8:00PM and 11:00PM, Monday through Sunday. Broadcast networks include ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and the CW. The general accessibility of broadcast television is greater than that of pay cable networks. Because of this, it can be argued that broadcast networks are slightly more vulnerable under the Nielsen ratings system. Nielsen uses a system of audience measurement tools that determine which demographics are most engaged with viewing television shows. It functions to determine the viewership and creates a ranking of all produced material. The ratings are reflected in the

treatment of certain shows. A well rated production will remain in its designated primetime viewing slot, usually for the run of the series. One with a lower rating will sometimes bounce around time slots, before its inevitable cancellation. Some are cancelled seemingly without a second thought, barely completing its run, if at all.

“Sweeps” are a crucial time period in the ratings gathering process. There are 4 months (November, February, May, July) in which Nielson processes the data gained from every demographic.<sup>2</sup> These are the periods in which the system can best assess the net consumption of televised shows. In regards to female same sex sexuality, the rush of “Sweeps” causes networks to eroticize it as a commodity for the sake of ratings. This is illustrated by a 1999 episode of Fox’s *Party of Five*, “I’ll Show You Mine.” Julia Salinger (Neve Campbell) is predominantly straight throughout the series. However, she has a small, three episode flirtation with a female writing professor; this included a chaste kiss. In the promotional material leading up to the episode, the kiss was exploited as a main draw. This occurred during a May “sweeps” period (Tropiano, 2002, p. 162).

Despite the sensationalism behind the kisses, there are restrictions on what can be shown. Cable networks have a greater flexibility to present more explicit sexual content. Broadcast networks are subject to tighter regulations on such matters. Ultimately, sweeps week “lesbianism” turns into a “blink and you miss it” blip on the greater radar of queer female visibility (Beirne, 2008).

In regards to physical representation of queer women, at the end of each television season, all broadcast and cable networks are graded by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)’s annual “Network Responsibility Index.” The grades perpetually hover around good, adequate and failing (with excellent being the highest). The most recent publication

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<sup>2</sup> <http://nielsen.com/us/en.html>

of the index (for the 2011-2012 season) indicated that ABC, Fox and the CW scored a “good rating.” Those networks are home to current queer female characters on shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Glee*, *Supernatural*, and the now cancelled *Emily Owens, MD*.

Meanwhile, NBC fell behind as “adequate,” with a minimal amount of gay male characters. However, the 2012-2013 television season saw the introduction of lesbian character, Anne, in a leading role on the sitcom *Go On*. However, the show has since been cancelled. In last place, CBS has acquired a “failing” grade in its representation of LGBT visibility, across the board. The only, series regular, queer female character is on *The Good Wife*. Often, gay couples will appear in the network’s reality television shows. However, across the board, homosexuality is common the butt of jokes on various sitcoms.<sup>3</sup> The fact that every network has not yet reached an “excellent,” if not “good” rating, is an indication of the need for an increase in queer female visibility on primetime broadcast television.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.glaad.org/publications/nri2012>

#### **IV. A Brief, But Troubling History of Queer Female Visibility in the Media**

As previously established, queer women are considered a minority by societal standards. In general, The LGBT community is considered a self-identified, sexual minority and functions as a “fringe” political group. The difference lay in the unlikelihood that LGBT individuals will be born into communities where siblings or parents share their minority status (Gross, 2001, p.13), furthering the community’s struggle to validate queer existence. It is also important to reiterate that women are erroneously categorized as a social minority. Despite the smaller population of men, they have several positions of power, likewise in the media. This is clearly reflected in the portrayal of women on film and television. Compared to the abundance of male role, there is a consistent lack of strong, female roles that exist, but some steps have been taken to address this inequity. The pace of which can be characterized as slow, but steady. It is a similar case for LGBT individuals, portrayals have increased and moved from a decidedly offensive point of view. However, there is a level of respect that has not yet been reached. As a subset, queer women are undoubtedly limited in television representation. Queer female sexuality has been portrayed as an act of criminal deviance, has been blatantly ignored, or simply serving the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers.

This socially constructed sense of deviance is reinforced by the number of “lesbian” scandals that stirred controversy on prime time television. For example, *Cagney and Lacey*, a female cop drama, first aired in 1982 with Tyne Daly and Meg Foster in the title roles. After the show’s start, Foster was inexplicably replaced by Sharon Gless. An anonymous CBS executive has been quoted as saying that the pairing of Daly/Foster was too tough and that the women were

perceived as “dykes.” A softer, more feminine Gless was perceived as safer and more heterosexual (Tropiano, 2002). This occurred even before lesbian relationships were explicitly portrayed on television. The two women were decidedly heterosexual and never indicated as anything more than friends. The casting replacement proved that anything threatening a decidedly heterosexual, or heteronormative, status quo is considered a threat; even a close female friendship. This negative attitude has contributed to years of socially engrained perceptions of female same sex sexuality.

Culturally inscribed perceptions of heterosexuality have been studied by Gagnon and Simon’s “scripting theory,” which posits that a socially constructed sexual script determines the rules of sexual relations. The script has been normalized to dominant understandings of sexuality; thus molding the social dimensions and relational contexts as heterosexual (as cited in Kim et al., 2007, p. 146). The problem lies in the fact that this heterosexual script is constantly present on television; engrained to a point of invisibility. We forget that it’s there, because heterosexuality is perceived as natural and normal. This can be dangerous to adolescent ideas of sex, sexuality and how they perceive it (Kim et al., 2007. p. 156). Heterosexual script produces a limited perspective that does not account for the diversity of sexuality present in our everyday lives.

Queer individuals, when watching television, seek visual extensions of their sexuality; representation that reminds viewers of common, human experience. It’s comforting to turn on the television and see someone like you; someone with whom you can relate. There has been scant opportunity for queer women on television. Until the mid-80’s, queer female representation had been reduced to criminality. A common trope was “the lesbian murderer;” as depicted on several crime shows, most notably NBC’s *Police Woman*. In 1974, an episode titled, “Flowers

of Evil,” depicted three lesbian women as murderers of elderly victims. The protagonist, Suzanne “Pepper” Anderson (Angie Dickinson), goes undercover to catch them. Upon the episode’s climax, Anderson targets the most vulnerable member of the team and pinpoints her as a victim of her sexuality, saying “I know what a love like yours can do to someone” (Tropiano, 2002, p. 67-68). The woman immediately gives up her cohorts and NBC scored itself a major controversy over the episode’s contents. Not only were the lesbian characters portrayed as murderers, but as murderers *because* they were lesbians.

In the years since, there has been little development of characters that are not stereotypical. In the 90’s, queer female characters were often defined by her sexuality and that alone. This is evidenced by the shift in ABC’s *Ellen*, which was cancelled in 1998 shortly after Ellen DeGeneres’ 1997 coming out, both on the show and in public. The last season was criticized for being too “issue-oriented,” and suddenly taking on an uncharacteristic, serious tone toward issues involving the gay community (p. 248-249).

Another common misstep is heterosexual characters constantly referring to the sexuality of queer female characters. This is indicated by several television shows, an example of which being NBC’s *Friends*. On the show, Ross Gellar’s ex-wife Susan came out as a lesbian and divorced him for another woman, a woman who she eventually marries on the show. While that is a fantastic step in queer female visibility; the episode “The One with the Lesbian Wedding” is full of stereotypical jokes and tropes about the couple’s lesbianism. Additionally, throughout the run of the series, appearances by Carol and her lover, Susan, were cannon fodder for hyper-masculine Joey Tribbiani’s heterosexual male fantasies.

If not treated properly, humor can become a springboard for offenses that de-humanize queer women, and all other LGBT individuals (Fouts & Inch, 2005). Scripted television on

broadcast networks reaches a large amount of younger audiences. We must also consider the effects that resonate within LGBT teens seeking representation. It is very possible that some adolescents will sculpt their personal views around characters they see on television; we must view it in its full potential as a socializing agent. The undeniable lack of role models available for LGBT youth can be damaging. Although, we must concede that LGBT teens do not attach only to other LGBT individuals. It would be irresponsible to perpetuate the idea that we can only relate to people with whom we share gender, sexuality and race. However, several women who have portrayed queer female characters on television will often receive messages and mail from fans in regards to the show. Naya Rivera, who plays lesbian teen, Santana Lopez, on Fox's *Glee*, has been quoted as saying she's received fan-mail from several gay teens. Often, they will thank her for the story she has helped tell and that it has helped them in their own coming out process.<sup>4</sup> This is a very clear example of why we cannot deny the effect that positive portrayals of queer women can achieve.

Queer women's current status can be viewed in the context of Clark's scheme of representation. He postulates that the representation of minority groups in television functions on a four tier scale. The rankings include non-representation, ridicule, regulation (or assimilation), and respect. In the past, queer existence has been dominantly defined by ridicule and assimilation into a heteronormative world. In recent years, results have improved and queer visibility has increased, however with very few instances of outright respect (as cited in Raley & Lucas, 2006). Though queer, multi-dimensional characters have slowly become integrated in our television consumption, there are still fundamental issues of equality that must be addressed.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2046002/Glees-Naya-Rivera-talks-reaction-shows-fans-lesbian-character.html>

GLAAD's "Where We Are On TV" report for the television 2012-2013 season, indicates a 4.4% representation of LGBT individuals of all scripted series regular characters on the broadcast networks. There are thirty-one LGBT identified regular characters on the networks, not including several recurring characters.<sup>5</sup> Though the numbers appear low, this is an increase from previous years. The number of lesbian characters has notoriously fluctuated consistently in recent years, reaching an all-time low in 2008 (Warn, *Visibility Matters*, 2008).

Once the current television season has reached completion, GLAAD's "Network Responsibility Index" will hopefully reflect a positive change in network grades. The 2011-2012 season showed that queer women made up 34% of LGBT characters on television, compared to the gay male's 61%.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that we're functioning within an assimilatory period of queer visibility. Though we are worrying less about being ridiculed, we're still far away from overall respect. It doesn't help that several shows wind up canceled between seasons, some halfway through their run. Often, they are shows that were LGBT inclusive. As I stated in a Chapter III, two shows including regular lesbian characters, the CW's *Emily Owens M.D.* and NBC's *Go On* will not be returning for the 2013-2014 season.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv12>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.glaad.org/publications/nri2012>

## V. Terminology for Deconstructing the Cultural Hegemony of Queer Women

It is important to comprehend the connection between television and positive visibility. However, we must also further understand the cultural constructs that consistently prevent full understanding of queer women.

In prior chapters, I have briefly touched on the concept of heteronormativity. Its significance lies in its clear prevalence on television. Because of heterosexual script, the general assumption is that most viewers are of majority status; people are heretofore straight until proven otherwise. The best strategy at our disposal is to create a counter-hegemonic dialogue that introduces a definition of the queer woman that will begin to deconstruct the heteronormative discourse. A dialogue that is affirmative of female same sex sexuality will allow viewers to normalize it on the diverse spectrum of human experience.

In order to fully grasp the concept of female same sex sexuality, we must familiarize ourselves with the appropriate terminology:

### *Using Queer as a Term:*

Through my analysis, I have used and will continue to use “queer” to refer women that are same sex oriented. As a term, it is difficult to pinpoint the definition; it can mean several things. It has been adapted and applied to the gay community with derogatorily charged implications. However, from an academic standpoint, “queer” functions as an umbrella term. It encompasses a wide array of definitions, allowing them to exist on the same spectrum. Used in

this context, it provides us with a wider understanding of how we should view women with same sex desire. Though contested by feminist scholars for its lack of definition, the term is amorphous enough to function in line with the concept of sexual fluidity (Walters, 1996). If we view sexuality on a spectrum, it will allow us to exist outside of the male/female, gay/straight binary. Most research on female same sex sexuality focuses on lesbianism and solely that; “adopting” queer validates the diversity of female sexuality. It accommodates bisexual women, unlabeled women and heterosexual women who have had same sex experiences.

*The Definition of Sexual Fluidity:*

Female same sex sexuality suffers from its historical inclusion in a binary characterized by heteronormativity. There are men and there are women. There are heterosexuals and there are homosexuals. There are gay men and there are lesbian women. As previously stated, sexual fluidity adopts a spectrum upon which we should view gender and sexuality.

As previously stated, the female gender has been constantly subject to a socially constructed a fear surrounding female sexuality. It is often connoted with danger and negativity. Recently, scholars have determined that female sexuality has several characteristics of flexibility. Baumeister’s “Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity: The Female Sex Drive as Socially and Flexibly Responsible,” argues that women are easily influenced by sociocultural variables which causes a higher rate of erotic plasticity in the female gender. Compared to male sexuality, women are perceived to be malleable and mutable. (Baumeister, 2000).

This research can easily be written off as women being defined as the biologically weaker sex. However “Contemporary Women’s Understanding of Female Sexuality”

supplemented this idea by postulating that sexuality is socially, historically and culturally constructed. The context in which it is defined should be a marriage of essentialist and social constructionist views, partially biological and partially affected by environmental and relational factors (Bellamy, Gott, Hinchliff & Nicolson, 2011).

Lisa Diamond's research on female same sex sexuality takes the latter perspective. Her research infers that women are more likely to engage in same sex activity. This is largely due to societally constructed gender differences that discourage the exploration of female sexuality outside of relational ties (Diamond, 2004). She postulates that several factors exist that can affect a woman's perception of her sexuality. She concedes that most women will adhere to a general sexual orientation, despite women's overall higher capacity for fluidity. It is important to note that she's found triggered sexual attractions can be long-lasting or temporary (2003). Factors that can contribute to this include the importance of the relationship held with the individuals, the intensity of those attractions, the availability of different partners, and the environment in which a woman can explore her sexuality (2008).

Diamond's research supports the idea that women are more likely to develop intimate, platonic relationships with other women that can potentially turn romantic and possibly, sexual (2004). She conducted a longitudinal study over several years that allowed her to track patterns of female same sex sexuality. She learned that sexual orientation can develop in mid-to-late adulthood, social factors can combine with biological factors, sexual feelings can change either abruptly or gradually, and that women can experience romantic passion, emotional intimacy and sexual desire in significantly different ways (2008). Diamond concedes that this field is in need of far more research. However, she argues that our society must embrace its language and begin a new discourse in terms of same sex sexuality.

In regards to media representation of queer women, Diamond tackled this subject in “I’m Straight, but I Kissed A Girl: the Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality.” She argued that current media representations have the effect of “trivializing and depoliticizing same sex sexuality by portraying it as a fashionable add-on to other otherwise conventional heterosexuality” (Diamond, 2005, pg. 105). She argues that media representations of female sexuality do not account for the sociopolitical context of female queerness. By defining it as a trendy or chic phase, it erases the significance of legitimately identifying as a queer woman and the subsequent activism for social equality that comes with it.

Sexual fluidity is integral in our understanding of female same sexuality. We must validate it as a concept to account for the current portrayals existent in primetime television shows. If we continue to ignore or lambast its existence, it cannot be accurately represented.

*The Trouble with Bisexuality:*

Bisexuality is a constant victim of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. When viewed in a binary, sexuality can become very black and white; negating the gray areas. The societal issue lies in bisexuality defying the existence of gender binaries. To most, it is a “pick one or other” situation; both would be greedy and/or promiscuous.

However in the media, bisexuality is both accessible and inaccessible. It is something we can attach to, but still find ways to ostracize. Meyer argues in “Representing Bisexuality on Television” that most portrayals of bisexuality are often of non-white women and are decidedly characterized as unstable individuals in the middle of an identity crisis. Bisexual women are also portrayed in relation to their heterosexual counterparts in the context of their relationships and

present stability and their need to be validated by said counterparts (Meyer, 2010). These factors impose a problematic “otherness” upon female bisexual characters; their sexuality is associated with being easily flexible due to their unstable nature and is therefore invalidated. Meanwhile, their need to have relationships validated within a heteronormative context enforces its irregularity in the face of the predominant normalcy. The article argues that ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy* and CBS’s *The Good Wife* include negative portrayals of bisexual women, viewing them as unstable.

In the same article, Meyer states that the 18-30 age demographic is coveted among networks (p. 369). This is especially crucial to note because that age period is often characterized as one of emerging adulthood. This is further characterized by individual instability and crisis that leads to an exploration of one’s identity in a way that may include revision to life plans, focused time for discovery and an inability to fully distinguish between adulthood and adolescence. This juxtaposition creates difficulty for those viewing bisexuality on television; it leads to a cultural perception of instability projected onto women who experience same sex desire.

Having said that, we must attach said concepts of bisexual instability to Diamond’s research. By doing so, we can assess bisexuality from the viewpoint that changes in sexual orientation can occur at any time, over time. Therefore, rejecting the notion of it being characteristic of an identity crisis and no longer validated.

## VI. Making the Case for Equality in Storytelling

Now that we are in a new a decade, *a new era*, for representation, where do the cards fall? As we've seen, queer female characters have struggled through a slew of stereotypical tropes; becoming pigeonholed and whitewashed in sexual diversity. The evil/dead lesbian is an unfortunately common stereotype that vilifies lesbianism; it lessens the threat to the heteronormative status quo by erasing it. We have seen stories like these unfold within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *ER* (Beirne, 2008). It was particularly harrowing in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Willow and Tara had been the longest running queer female relationship on primetime broadcast television (2.5 years). In the episode, "Seeing Red," the couple had recently reunited after a brief separation. At the end, Tara was accidentally shot and murdered. This was troubling due to the juxtaposition of Tara's murder and images of the couple having been physically intimate for most of the episode's runtime. Show creator, Joss Whedon, is a self-identified feminist and did not intentionally create that meaning. However, it can be viewed in a negative context due to the existing stigma surrounding female same sex sexuality.

Similarly, the stereotype of the pregnant lesbian is decidedly common. We cannot deny the fact that some queer women also desire children or the fact that queer women are just as susceptible to death as any other human being; it would be irresponsible to the cause of developing a normalized, gay affirmative discourse to exclude that. However, when there are only so many queer women on television, it becomes tiresome to see the same story played out constantly (i.e. on *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Friends*, et. al). Just as we should promote and account

for the spectrum of queerness in women, we must also account for diversity within the stories of these women.

The mundane history of poorly told, inadequate story lines projected upon queer women is problematic. Because the affirmation of female same sex sexuality is still fairly recent, this has caused a relative immaturity in the stories we've seen. It gets frustrating to constantly watch stereotypical portrayals of queer women that are inequitable to their heterosexual counterparts. However, that also means a queer woman is not restricted to her defined sense of sexuality, but should free to explore within it; a woman who has sexual relations with women, might also want to have sex with men (Hallowell, *In Defense of Pregnant TV Lesbian*, 2012). The bottom-line being: it's okay! In order to move past our historical bias, we must affirm the fact that queer female characters should be portrayed as multi-dimensional, meaning that any experience within the spectrum of human experience can apply to them.

The goal is to normalize queer women's existence in a new discourse that breaks down heteronormative hegemony. As a result, we will have created a cultural script of respect for her; effectively allowing us to move toward a new gender/sexuality inclusive sphere of influence. I realize this is all very idealistic, but we must assign some sense of power behind language and its use in television. Now is the time, especially in this topically relevant period for LGBT rights (i.e. the fight for marriage equality). We must keep moving toward the development of a discourse that creates respect and validation of the queer woman.

## VII. Fan Bases and The Problem of Over-Identifying

Queerly attuned television viewers do not react well to stereotypical portrayals of a queer woman in the context of previously established stereotypical settings. This is especially true if a trope is applied to a well-established, multi-dimensional queer female character. It feels out of the ordinary for her. Loyal viewers become hurt in a profound way. However, if we can accept the existence of stereotypes as randomly occurring instances that sometimes hold truth in a normal life span, it is easier to forgive when used.

It seems silly that people would get so attached to a television show. It's not true reality; everyone has a life to live. However, it is so easy to forget about the cultural impact television carries. When a television show is popular enough, it attains a fierce following. Online communities develop that take existing or implied female same sex couples and further fictionalize their relations. Usually, they are fleshed out stories that take the route of exposing the scenes not seen on the television screen, both romantic and explicit. It becomes an open forum for people to appreciate television characters, sometimes giving them more respect than the writers. After Ellen's Heather Hogan postulates that the writing of "fan-fiction" becomes a space where queer women can explore their sexuality unashamed (Hogan, *Why Smart Lesbians Read and Write Fan Fiction*, 2012). This is indicative of the care with which we must treat queer female characters. The existence of these online spaces is the most defining argument for the importance of female same sex representation on television. Ensemble television shows will generally have at least one individual that acts as the driving force. Very rarely, is that character a queer woman. Queer female characters are commonly the sidekick/best friend to the main

character. Furthermore, within ensemble casts where different stories are constantly being told, it becomes difficult to accurately represent all character struggles consistently. It makes sense that these communities or fandoms would create themselves.

The counterargument stems from fandom critics on the level of wanting too much too soon or seemingly forgetting the fact that conflict creates stories. While this may be true, we must respect the structure of narrative television. Material for character development must be spread out across an entire season (if not multiple seasons); without conflict, it wouldn't be a very interesting show to watch. However, this does not lessen the emotional impact we sustain from investing in characters that are projections of ourselves. I will concede that it is unhealthy to project so much emotional weight onto fictional characters. It is undeniable, though, that television can be a powerful medium in that sense. Writers and producers must recognize the responsibility they have to portray minority groups in a non-derogatory manner.

Audiences watch television to relate. We wish to see people like us, who we can root for, whether or not the person is likable. The human experience can be so vast, rich, and intimate. We search for that connection. Queer viewers can form that bond with a heterosexual character, but there's a certain level of profound connection that comes from a person who is *just like you*. You know that somehow, she has been through exactly the same struggles.

Executive producer/show-runner Shonda Rhimes (*Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, *Scandal*) is a writer who has committed to organically telling the stories of queer women. She will often maintain a dialogue with her fans over social media. When a fan criticized her for "pandering to the gay community," she responded with a passionate defense:

“And because I love all my gay and lesbian friends. AND because I think same-sex marriage is the civil rights fight of our era and back when being a person of color was the civil rights fight, people like **Norman Lear** put black people on TV and helped change some minds. So you know, it's gotta be paid forward. As long as we are willing to sit by while one person is not free, none of us are free. And FINALLY: because as long as someone feels like it is OK to ask the question "why all the gay people on your shows," then there is still a HUGE problem that needs to be solved. It's like asking "Why all the black people on your shows." (Which is, in fact, why there are also a lot of people of my color on shows. Cause people keep asking. Like it's unusual. Which means we have a LONG way to go). OK, done preaching” (as cited in Piccoli, Note on a Fandom, 2013).

This is the best way to describe the attitude that all writers should have toward female same sex sexuality (and LGBT rights/gender and race equality for that matter). The goal is to promote the validation of queer women as *human beings*.

The fact remains that there is an exceptionally small number of queer female characters on television. The immense emotional attachment projected on these characters can be problematic. We tend to attach to characters because watching a television show becomes a commitment. We are drawn to characters to whom we can relate; we develop an ongoing investment and tune in to watch their struggles and triumphs every week. We must appreciate the level of emotional investment fostered by television; yet still exercise caution of it.

As stated prior, with the assistance of social media outlets, twitter and tumblr, fans often communicate with show runners in grassroots efforts to secure visibility. Due to the intensity of

which fans attach to the television canon, they are often subject to unfair criticism. Often, the response from writers is less than kind. However, it is understandable given the constant criticism they experience every day. When it comes to visibility, what sacrifices can we afford to make? Queer female identified fans of queer female characters crave a healthy relationship for a minority that has been characterized as anything but that. We're *still* kind of starving for representation. To see a positive, organic, honest representation of queer women would mean that we can be fully respected outside of the heteronormative binary. This is why we tend to over-identify with them, because they are the only characters that we have. Queer female characters become beacons of representation for the community as whole. This creates an incredible amount of pressure weighted toward the representation of those characters. When the representation is less than positive and non-stereotypical, the reaction is exacerbated.

Famously, in 2008 Rhimes incorporated a queer female storyline onto *Grey's Anatomy*. However, shortly after its inception and execution, one of the involved actors, Brooke Smith, was suddenly fired. It created a hailstorm in the media. Rhimes and the ABC network were accused of homophobia and unfair firing (Warn, *Grey's Consultant Nikki Weiss Discusses Brooke Smith's Firing*, 2008). However, when questioned, Rhimes stated that there was simply not enough chemistry between the characters. Dr. Hahn was not a particularly likable, attachable character and the writers felt they could not do enough with her. When she disappeared without a trace, her loss was deeply felt. This was particularly difficult, especially for that year, 2008, which was severely low on queer women. However, Rhimes rectified the situation a mere few episodes later with the introduction of Jessica Capshaw as Dr. Arizona Robbins, who has since entered into an enduring, realistic, *complicated* relationship with the other half of the previous queer pairing, Sara Ramirez's Dr. Callie Torres.

If this situation had occurred with a heterosexual couple, it is possible that the outrage would not have had the same magnitude. Several heterosexual couples on the show have broken up, but none were so controversial to cause a question of Rhimes' attitude toward equality. That's not to say a heterosexual character's loss wouldn't be felt, but in the context of a legitimately unhealthy lack of gay visibility, the loss of a queer character is a huge blow.

### VIII. Visibility and Empowerment are Not Synonymous

For the sake of the argument, it should be noted that visibility is not the same as empowerment (Beirne, 2008). I have used visibility several times in the context of queer women's televised presence. It is good to be visible; having a queer female character on television automatically acknowledges our existence in society. However, the way that the portrayals progress can be incredibly damaging.

Just because queer women are present in the sphere of television representation, it does not mean that creators share a progressive, positive attitude. Some may argue that there is no such thing as bad visibility. If queer women are out there, it's a good starting point. However, if the portrayal is based in a heteronormative understanding of queerness, it is simply reinforcing queerness within the context of heteronormativity. We must understand queerness within the discourse that *queerness* has developed. Only then, can we begin to bridge the gap between queer women and heterosexuality. As I have previously stated, we have not yet reached a level of respect in the portrayal of queer female characters. We are hovering around a solid, regulatory base.

Empowerment is the next step. We should be striving for visibility that normalizes queer women. We are looking for queer female characters that are validated in their sexual desires, romantic ties and personal pursuits. Queer female characters that are not simply defined by the fact of their emotional and sexual attachment to women. We need complicated, realistic human beings.

## IX. Textual Analysis of Current Queer Female Characters

The most important aspect of any television show is the messages communicated with the audience. In narrative television, we gain this perspective from the ways that characters interact with one another. The writers must create a dialogue that supplements these ideas.

I have chosen to closely analyze two prime time broadcast television shows (ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* and Fox's *Glee*) featuring main characters that have a long tenure, both on the show and as queer women. I have selected several scenes for textual analysis that demonstrate a discourse that validates female same sex sexuality.

### *Grey's Anatomy:*

Dr. Callie Torres arrived during Season 2 of *Grey's*. She was established as heterosexual through her first 3 seasons. She began a relationship with Dr. George O' Malley, married him, and they later divorced. It wasn't until the end of Season 4 that the show began to explore Callie's sexuality. Upon becoming good friends with Dr. Erica Hahn, a dialogue develops that supports the possibility of a relationship between the two women. Judging by their close friendship, her friends insinuate the possible romantic connection. Following the confrontation of their feelings, the two women, for the first time, tentatively begin dating one another.

In Season 5, Episode 6 "Life During Wartime," Erica comically (yet, poignantly) realizes the extent of her lesbianism, likening her sex with Callie to being prescribed glasses as a child. She claims Callie as her "glasses," and being the reason that she can see now that she is "so, so gay, so extremely gay" ("Life After Wartime," 2008). The overwhelming embrace of lesbianism by Erica spooks Callie, as she is still aware that she enjoys sex with men. As a result, she has

sexual relations with friend Dr. Mark Sloan, twice, in the same episode. While this is in the context of her being in a relationship with Erica, Callie worries about whether she might be bisexual; a valid question to raise in the wake of enjoying a same sex sexuality experience in an otherwise heteronormative context.

Callie ultimately accepts her bisexuality, though Erica does not and feels it is too much of a gray area for their relationship. Following an argument in a subsequent episode, Erica leaves Callie alone in the parking lot. She tells Callie “you can’t *kinda* be a lesbian” before her final words, “I don’t know you at all.” (“Rise Up,” 2008). Noted prior, Brooke Smith had subsequently been fired from the show which created a controversy of homophobic accusations about creator Shonda Rhimes and the ABC Network. It is understandable that the brevity of the storyline can be frustrating. It reinforces the need for a lasting media representation of queer women.

Reading it within the script enriched by sexual fluidity, Callie’s actions can be seen as a very realistic reaction to a woman exploring her sexuality. She had been straight her whole life, found she enjoyed physical intimacy with a woman, but knew she still had that with men. It is believable that she would seek out a sexual encounter with a man to assess her same sex attraction. Callie even remarks in the moments following a sexual liaison with Mark that sex with him *and* Erica is “awesome” (“Life After Wartime,” 2008). This is incredibly important dialogue that actively validates the existence of bisexuality. The negativity lies in Erica’s rejection of Callie’s desire for both men and women. Considering Erica’s revelation in the same episode, her reaction is a common characteristic of lesbian women who look down upon bisexuality.

In the aftermath of Erica's departure, Callie does not return to being exclusively heterosexual. Though she continues a sexual relationship with Mark, her bisexuality is further acknowledged and validated.

Several episodes later, a romantic interest is introduced in Dr. Arizona Robbins. Arizona comes on the show as the head of pediatrics, and as an established, openly lesbian surgeon. In Season 5, Episode 14 "Beat Your Heart Out," Arizona boldly kisses Callie upon their first meeting, indicating her interest in romantic involvement. This sparked the start of a multiple season relationship that has endured through the most recent season of *Grey's*.

Textually, the scene is significant in the way it sets up a discourse for an affirmative discussion of sexual orientation on *Grey's Anatomy*:

*Arizona*: People talk where we work. They talk. A lot. So, for the sake of being honest I feel like I should tell you that I know things about you...because people talk.

*Callie*: Oh, you mean? Terrific.

*Arizona*: It is actually, the talk. People really like you over there. They respect you and they're concerned and interested. They really like you. Some of them *really* like you. You just, you look upset, and I thought that you should know that the talk is good.

*Season 5, Episode 14 "Beat Your Heart Out"*

This conversation insinuates that there has been public discussion of Callie's sexual orientation. The most positive aspect of the conversation being that it has not affected her coworkers' level of respect for her as a friend or colleague. Arizona's insistence on the talk being "good" is integral to our development of a discourse encourages engagement and normalization of female same sex

sexuality. The fact that the dialogue is punctuated by a kiss emphasizes the normality of queer women.

As the relationship progresses, the couple is not without conflict. Shortly after their initial flirtation, Arizona rejects Callie's advances upon the grounds of her being a "newborn" in regards to her sexuality ("An Honest Mistake," 2009). This reaction seems insensitive to the exploration of female sexuality, of which, we are aware can happen at any time in life. However, as shown before with Erica (who also fully identified as a lesbian), it is a realistic nod to the negative attitude that lesbians can have toward bisexual women, particularly to those that are recent explorers of it. However, this is rectified in subsequent episodes when Arizona apologizes for her shortcomings and the two begin to date.

The coming out narrative becomes a significant portion of their continued storyline. Earlier on the show, Callie was established as having wealthy, conservative, religious parents. "Sweet Surrender" (Season 5, Episode 20), marks the first instance of this narrative. When Callie's father comes for a visit, he violently accosts Callie's ex-husband George for having an affair. In an attempt to quell his anger, she tells him that she had slept with Mark during the breakdown of the marriage. Her father's immediate response is to accost Mark. Callie's final attempt to calm him came from her coming out to him, stating her happiness and her hope that he will accept it. Upon being introduced to Callie's father, Arizona states "And I really hope you draw the line at throwing women against walls" ("Sweet Surrender," 2009). Arizona's dialogue addresses the fear of initial homophobia that may accompany any coming out situation.

Callie's father spends the remainder of the episode trying to convince Callie to move back home and rescind her relationship with Arizona. She is understandably upset and wrestles with how to handle the matter. Mark speaks the ultimate words of wisdom: "supporting someone

and respecting someone are not the same thing” (“Sweet Surrender,” 2009). Mark’s statement validates the fact that queer women must be respected for their expression of sexuality. Callie cannot be bullied into relinquishing her queerness. She makes the decision to cut him off herself.

In a textually rich episode, Callie’s tension with her father is revisited in Season 6, Episode 5 (the aptly titled) “Invasion.” Her relationship with Arizona has continued into the subsequent season and is particularly happy. He visits the hospital to mend the broken bond left from his last visit. Unfortunately, he has brought along the priest from their religious congregation. Callie’s immediate response is to yell at her father, in front of a crowded waiting room, “you can’t pray away the gay!” (“Invasion,” 2009). The use of religion to combat homosexuality is a common argument used to deny its validity. Callie’s delivery of this dialogue affirms the absurdity that homosexuality can be cured.

This argument continues for most of the episode. However, it is Arizona who turns out to be the catalyst in the shift of their discourse. She is able to bring Callie out of her anger by suggesting that talking would be the best solution to their disagreement:

*Arizona:* Maybe you should try and *talk* to him.

*Callie:* I have nothing to say, if he wants throw away our relationship after 30 years then that’s his decision.

*Arizona:* He hasn’t done anything here. You’re the one that changed the game.

*Callie:* You didn’t expect a little understanding when you came out to your parents?

*Arizona:* I never had boyfriends...ever. I had a poster on my wall of Cindy Crawford, and I wasn’t just looking at her mole. It wasn’t news to my mom when I brought somebody home named Joanne. But, you. You dated men your whole life, you loved men, you even

married one. You want to talk about 30 years of a relationship...he's been consistent for 30 years. All of a sudden, you're a whole new girl. So, cut him some slack. Sit down and have a conversation. Give him room to be...a little shocked.

*Season 6, Episode 5, "Invasion"*

Callie, now empowered with a new discourse, attempts the conversation again. However, her father refuses to budge on the matter. He has yet to embrace the discourse she has gained. Arizona must act, again, as the voice of reason:

*Callie's Father:* I don't know you enough to talk about her. We're not gonna do that.

*Arizona:* Most people think that I was named for the state, but that's not true. I was named for a battleship; the SS Arizona. My grandfather was serving on the Arizona when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and he saved 19 men before he drowned. Pretty much everything my father did his whole life was about honoring that sacrifice. I was raised to be a good man in a storm. Raised to love my country, my family and protect the things I love. When my father, Colonel Daniel Robbins of the United States Marine Corps, heard that I was a lesbian, he said he only had one question. I was prepared for "how fast can you get the hell out of my house?" But instead, it was "are you still who I raised you to be?" My father believes in his country, the way you believe in God. My father is not a man who bends, but he bent for me because I am his daughter. I am a good man in a storm. I love your daughter and I protect the things I love. Not that I need to, she doesn't need it, she's strong and caring and honorable and she is who you raised her to be.

*Season 6, Episode 5, "Invasion"*

Arizona's words are what inspire Callie's father to accept a different, same sex sexuality affirmative discourse. They reconcile and he even asks for a wedding and children, a request to which Callie is agreeable. We must concede to the desire for marriage and children as existing in a heteronormative context. This desire later leads to a temporary break-up for the couple toward the end of the same season. Simply put, Arizona does not want kids and Callie sees this as a deal-breaker despite them being very much in love. However, Callie's desire for a family should be seen as a normalization of a queer woman wanting to have the same rights and values as a heterosexual counterpart.

During the emotionally volatile season six finale "Sanctuary/Death and All His Friends;" a shooter takes out revenge on the hospital for the death of wife; several relationships change as a result. However, this does not come without an airing of their grievances. During an argument, Arizona expresses her discontent with Callie's bisexuality and Callie's discontent with Arizona's disregard for her dreams.

*Callie:* I have spent the last month trying to convince myself that I don't need kids to be happy. Really trying. Giving lectures to myself, saying it out loud to you and to Mark and turning myself inside out to want what you wanted. Then I stopped for a second and I thought "did you ever try to imagine what it would be like to change for me?" because I don't think you did. What you did was you dismissed my dream, my dream, which says to me that you don't give a rat's ass if I'm happy. I never understood squat about who you are and now I do and I don't like it.

*Arizona:* Oh, really, really, really? I'm supposed to change for you? Why? Because we're in love? I mean, because you fall in love all the time, men, women-

**[Following an interruption...]**

*Callie:* When are you going to forgive me for not being a good enough lesbian for you?

*Arizona:* When you do something to convince me that you're falling in love with *me* and not with being in love. When you do something to convince me that I'm different from George O'Malley, Erica Hahn, Mark Sloan or the girl at the coffee cart. I mean, you have a huge heart and I love that about you. But, I don't trust you. Why would I?

*Season 6, Episode 23, "Sanctuary"*

These conversations are important for further highlighting the bi-phobia present within queer women. Arizona doesn't trust Callie because of the perception that she will flip-flop back to heterosexuality at any point in the course of their relationship. This reinforces the stereotype that bisexuals are promiscuous, greedy and unstable. However, it is realistic that Arizona, a self-identified lesbian, who has a past in passing this kind of judgment, would feel this way. This helps us to understand the fear associated with bisexuality. To understand this fear is to find a new way to deconstruct this context and create a new one.

It is evident, as the episode progresses, that the crisis will bring them together and they both try to reconcile their attitudes toward each other. By the end, Callie is prepared to give up her dream of kids while Arizona is prepared to have children with her. Due to their shared discourse and its rearrangement, they reach a healthy, equal middle ground and reaffirm their love.

Their relationship has continued and is still a fixture on the show, well into its ninth season. Since their reunion at the end of season six, the couple broke up again, got back together, dealt with an unplanned pregnancy, a major car accident, a marriage, and a major plane crash that resulted in the loss of Arizona's leg. Several major life events have happened to them and Rhimes has promised her fans that Callie and Arizona are meant to be, despite all the conflict that has befallen them. They are up against the context of several heterosexual couples in the show; couples that are all experiencing the same conflicts: break ups, children, marriage, divorce, major accidents. If anything, this validates their queer relationship. They have been shown getting *married*, during a time period where marriage equality is still a huge issue in our country's politics. Their relationship should be viewed as an important step in queer visibility.

Shonda Rhimes has always been under massive scrutiny for the way she portrays minorities on the show, despite her insistence on colorblind casting and her commitment to the inclusion of LGBT characters. However, we must appreciate her contribution to queer visibility and the discourse with which she's supplemented it.

She's been quoted as saying: "I learned that we were in the awkward, strange, uncomfortable position of being the only network show with lesbian characters and when you're the only, everyone's staring at you and dissecting everything you do. Really we were just trying to find the most organic way for the characters to play out their relationships" (TV Guide). As a result, she's created a pair that absolutely everyone can root for, experiencing the same struggles as any couple.

*Glee:*

Initially a passing joke on Ryan Murphy's *Glee*, a story of two queer female characters blossomed into a narrative of realism and bravery in love. The show had already established itself as gay friendly during the first season with one of main characters, Kurt, having a coming out narrative. Queer male and queer female stories are rarely told in tandem, but *Glee's* world of homosexual normalization is a stark contrast to a heteronormative existence. Set against the backdrop of a Midwestern high school, the show is all about fighting stereotypes and accepting your true self. Characters often express themselves through song, especially when going through emotionally tumultuous experiences. By virtue of its camp value, some of the dialogue should be taken with a grain of salt. It is also important to note that the show is not the most solid in terms of character development or consistency. However, when the show gets it right, it is *right*. The coming out of teen cheerleaders, Santana and Brittany, followed a real, organic path that has become incredibly important to sphere of queer female representation.

In Season 1, Episode 13 "Sectionals," a passing comment is made by Brittany in which she implies a sexual relationship with Santana. It happened, it was ignored, the show moved forward. This development was not furthered or acknowledged until the show's second season. Until we receive confirmation that the two women are still engaged in a sexual relationship, they are shown as simply very close friends. Which, we can ascertain from Diamond's research can have commonly intimate undertones. They are constantly portrayed as touching, being affectionate and smiling at one another. It is evident that they are close and it is easy to accept

the fact that they have been sexually active within the context of their intimate, platonic relationship. It makes sense that they may experiment.

Brittany and Santana are both portrayed as being sexually promiscuous; Brittany with more than one gender, Santana having a consistent, on again off again relationship with male character, Puck. In Season 2, Episode 4 “Duets,” Santana and Brittany are shown in bed together, clothed, but engaging in intimate actions. Brittany comments that she wants to sing a duet with Santana, more specifically Melissa Etheridge’s “Come to My Window.” Santana immediately shuts down Brittany’s desire for a more serious definition of their “relationship.”

*Santana:* First of all, there’s a lot of talking going on and I wants to get my mack on. Second of all, I’m not making out with you because I’m in love you with you and want to sing about making ladybabies. I’m only here because Puck’s been in the slammer for about 12 hours now and I’m like a lizard, I need something warm beneath me or I can’t digest my food.

*Season 2, Episode 4, “Duets”*

At the surface, the dialogue is borderline offensive and does the exact opposite of validating female same sex sexuality. However, it actually lays the groundwork for the complications of Santana accepting that sexuality within herself. Shortly after Santana’s rejection, Brittany enters into a loving relationship with another member of the Glee club, Artie. This inspires intense jealousy in Santana and she proceeds to date a recent addition to the club, Sam. However, Brittany and Santana continue to be portrayed as having a close, intimate friendship.

Their relationship comes to a head in Season 2, Episode 15 “Sexy.” It is revealed, that despite their respective relationships, the two women still have regular sexual liaisons. They have this exchange:

***Brittany:*** I want to talk to you about something. I really like when we make out.

***Santana:*** Which isn’t cheating because-

***Brittany:*** The plumbing is different. But when Artie and I are together, we talk about stuff like feelings.

***Santana:*** Why?

***Brittany:*** Because with feelings it’s better.

***Santana:*** Are you kidding? It’s better when it doesn’t involve feelings. I think it’s better when it doesn’t involve eye contact.

***Brittany:*** I don’t know. I guess I don’t know how I feel about us.

***Santana:*** Look, let’s be clear here, I’m not interested in any labels. Unless it’s on something I shoplift.

***Brittany:*** I don’t know, Santana. I think we should talk to somebody. Like an adult. This relationship is really confusing for me.

*Season 2, Episode 15, “Sexy”*

Within the context of their friendship, the dialogue does not perpetuate the stereotype of the overly sexually active bisexual. It still makes sense that their close relationship would lead to sexual contact. Santana still fiercely opposes her queerness. However, there’s now the added layer of complication (and affirmation that they are more than just a fling) by the addition of

their cheating on significant others; sanctioned by the “different plumbing” argument. Brittany reinforces the idea that they need to talk; they need to create a new discourse that will affirm the existence of their relationship.

They seek out the guidance of substitute sex education teacher, Holly Holliday. She has a private conversation with them:

**Ms. Holliday:** I want to ask if either one of you thinks you might be a lesbian.

**Brittany:** I don't know.

**Santana:** Yeah, I mean, who knows. I'm attracted to girls and I'm attracted to guys. I made out with a mannequin. I even had a sex dream about a shrub that was in the shape of a person.

**Ms. Holliday:** Well, we've all been there. I went to an all girl's college where the only industry was the manufacturing of softball equipment. I still feel a little tingle when I hear Ani DiFranco. Anyway, it's not about who you are attracted to, ultimately, it's about who you fall in love with.

**Brittany:** Well, I don't know how I feel because Santana refuses to talk about it.

*Season 2, Episode 15, “Sexy”*

Though there are some stereotypical tropes present in the dialogue involving over-sexualization, all-girls colleges and softball, the nature of *Glee* requires us to read it in a satirical manner. The discussion is important by the simple fact that it's even being discussed. It's an acknowledgement of queer female existence in high school; a setting that is considered relatively hostile. Ms. Holliday says it best: it's about who you love. Her ultimate suggestion is to have the

girls find a song and express themselves through it. This will function to finally create a dialogue between the girls about their relationship.

Later in the episode, Brittany and Santana perform Fleetwood Mac's *Landslide* with Ms. Holliday, all while exchanging looks of longing and intense emotion, in front of the boys they're dating. Santana is very clearly coming to terms with her sexuality. This is affirmed at a conversation had between the two girls later:

**Santana:** I wanted to thank you for performing that song with me in Glee Club. It's made me do a lot of thinking and what I've realized is why I'm such a bitch all the time. I'm a bitch because I'm angry. I'm angry because I have all of these feelings, feelings for you. That I'm afraid of dealing with because I'm afraid of dealing with the consequences.

Brittany, I can't go to an Indigo Girls concert, I just can't...I wanna be with you, but I'm afraid of the talks and the looks. I mean you know what happened to Kurt at this school.

**Brittany:** But honey, if anyone were to ever make fun of you, you would either kick their ass or slash them with your vicious, vicious words.

**Santana:** Yeah, I know, but-I'm so afraid of what everyone will say behind my back.

But, still I have to accept that I love you. I love you and I don't want to be with Sam or Finn or any of those other guys. I just want you. Please say you love me back, please.

*Season 2, Episode 15 "Sexy"*

This dialogue is Santana finally accepting her sexuality, in a public hallway, constantly looking around to make sure no one is listening. She is afraid to acknowledge her love because she knows it will create discourse not only for her sexuality, but a societally negative one for her

peers. However, she is rejected by Brittany on the grounds of loving her, but being in a pre-existing relationship with Artie, something she doesn't want to give up. However, Brittany offers that if they were ever both single at the same time, she would be with Santana. This causes Santana to remark "Whoever thought that being fluid meant you could be so stuck?" ("Sexy," 2011). Hurt, she lashes out at women who experience desire for men and women, because the girl she loves wants to stay with a boy. As a result, Santana rejects the option of coming out as a lesbian and proceeds to mask it by blackmailing a fellow closeted gay student into a fake relationship.

In Season 2, Episode 19 "Rumours," Artie and Brittany break up. Santana comforts Brittany, this time privately with a song that affirms their love, Fleetwood Mac's *Songbird*. However, Santana is still reluctant to publicly declare her lesbianism. Brittany's openness of her own sexuality and gentle encouragement remains. Her encouragement comes to a head during Season 2, Episode 20 "Prom Queen" in which Santana loses the race, lamenting the loss of the symbolic title of queen:

**Santana:** I get to be an outsider my whole life. Can I just have one night where I'm queen and I'm accepted? As soon as we get to New York, I'm bailing to live in a lesbian colony or Tribeca. They must have sensed that I was a lesbian. They must have. Do I smell like a golf course?

**Brittany:** They don't know what you're hiding, they know that you're not being yourself. If you were to embrace all the awesomeness that you are, you would have won.

*Season 2, Episode 20 "Prom Queen"*

This discussion is important in the way that Santana brings up societal attitude toward her lesbianism. Her main concern is about subverting her gayness for one more night, to feel acceptance from her peers. However, Brittany that assures her that if she merely owned her sexuality, it would be something others would accept. Brittany tries to engage Santana in a new discourse. Mind you, this conversation takes place within the context of gay character, Kurt, having been elected Prom Queen by his peers, presumably as a cruel joke. However, he takes it in stride and accepts his title graciously, fearlessly leading his class in the episode's final dance. Kurt is at a point where he can own his sexuality in a hostile, heteronormative environment. The others see that in him and accept his sexuality because of it. Santana has not quite reached such a public affirmation.

In the following season, Santana finally comes to terms with everything and enters a relationship with Brittany. This sets the stage for a poignant affirmation of her sexuality. She acknowledges a relationship between the two in Season 3, Episode 4 "Pot O' Gold." Though, there remained no public acknowledgement of their relationship, despite their very obvious close relationship. In Season 3, Episode 6 "Mash Off." It is here that Glee club member Finn publicly outs Santana after she insults him:

***Finn:*** Why don't you just come out of the closet? You know I think I know why you're so good at tearing everybody else down. It's because you're constantly tearing yourself down because you can't admit to yourself that you're in love with Brittany and that she might not love you back. That must hurt, not being able to admit to everybody how you really feel. You know what I think you are? A coward.

*Season 3, Episode 6, "Mash Off"*

In a fit of rage, Finn attempts to force Santana into the public discourse, something that she has not been able to do for herself. Unfortunately, his actions outed her on a larger scale, a very public one that required her to have to come out. Out of guilt, Finn continues to force (under the guise of encouragement) Santana to accept her sexuality, despite her lashing out at him. In a scene that echoes “Prom Queen,” he encourage Santana to not hide the parts of her that make her awesome, including her sexuality. He spends most of Season 3, Episode 7 “I Kissed A Girl” cajoling her to come out of the closet, along with the rest of the glee club.

The discussion is framed in the context of Glee Club being a place where you can accept yourself for who you are and by virtue of the fact that everybody in the club is well aware of their relationship. However, it is extremely problematic in the way Santana’s sexuality is being legitimately forced out of her by a heteronormative influence, attempting to normalize her within its own context. Though, a vague sense of realism rings true throughout the discussion. Sometimes society will out you and there’s only so much you can do except own it.

Santana spends most of the episode fighting the provoked coming out; until she can no longer resist. Finn finally tells her that he is afraid she will die if she doesn’t accept her sexuality. His concern is based on the societal context of LGBT teen suicide as a prevalent and major risk. Santana finally concedes and accepts the fact that she has been outed. Upon entering the public discourse, she is immediately accosted by a jock:

**Jock:** Girls like you are a challenge and you just need the right guy to straighten you out and I’m just the man to do it.

*Season 3, Episode 7, “I Kissed a Girl”*

This is a disgusting, yet confirmed attitude directed toward queer women. The idea that a woman who experiences same sex desire just needs to be “straightened out” is a problematic result of queer women having to exist in a heteronormative context. This isn’t the first time we’ll hear it, or the last. However, Santana’s new, queer discourse comes with the backing of several girls in the glee club, those now included within a same sex sexuality affirmative attitude:

*Mercedes:* Move your busted, creeper ass.

*Tina:* Now.

*Jock:* Easy girls, I’m just trying to make her normal.

*Brittany:* She is normal.

*Quinn:* It’s not a choice, idiot. But even if it were, you’d be her last choice.

*Jock:* Oh, I get it, you’re all a bunch of lesbos.

*Rachel:* So what if we are? You don’t stand a chance either way.

*Season 3, Episode 7, “I Kissed a Girl”*

This exchange is followed by a spirited, if not slightly problematic, rendition of Katy Perry’s “bi-curious” anthem “I Kissed a Girl.” For the most part, Santana’s coming out is framed in the context of heteronormativity. She must be validated by the majority in order to be of any value. This creation of discourse becomes an issue in the sense that Santana didn’t have the opportunity to make that decision for herself. Coming out is an important, on-going process that needs to be in the power of person doing it. When another glee club member, Kurt Hummel, came out in Season 1, he was allowed to determine his own coming out; despite everyone having known

about his sexuality. However, the same can be argued for Santana's character; her relationship with Brittany wasn't exactly subtle.

It is important to note that Santana finally gets the chance to take control over her own coming out. Her parents react positively and are fine with it. However, when she does so with her grandmother, the results are not as inspiring:

*Santana:* Abuelita, I love girls the way that I'm supposed to feel about boys. It's just something that's always been inside of me. And I really wanna share it with you because I love you so much. I want you to know me. Who I really am. When I'm with Brittany, I finally understand what people are talking about when they talk about love. And I have tried so hard to push this feeling away and keep it locked inside. But, every day just feels like a war and I walk around so mad at the world. But I'm really just fighting with myself. I don't wanna fight anymore. I'm just too tired. I have to just be me. Say something please.

*Season 3, Episode 7, "I Kissed a Girl"*

Santana's words are a poignant account of her affirmation of same sex sexuality within herself. She describes it in the context of being stifled by society's view on homosexuality, but despite that, she is prepared to start a new dialogue with herself; a dialogue that she asks her grandmother to join. Her grandmother responds as such:

**Grandmother:** Everyone has secrets Santana. They're called secrets for a reason. I want you to leave this house. I don't ever want to see you again.

*Season 3, Episode 7, "I Kissed a Girl"*

Her grandmother reaffirms the prevalent, if not slightly dying, attitude toward same sex sexuality. She rejects the new discourse and maintains the archaic, imposed one. However, this does not force Santana out of the closet. She accepts the help from peers and carries on, prepared to continue the discourse that affirms her sexuality. The show is now in its fourth season and though her relationship with Brittany has since ended, her orientation has been maintained as lesbian.

Though most lesbians have a contemptuous relationship with show-runner Ryan Murphy, we cannot deny the importance of this narrative. The complicated story of queer teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality is an important one. Though some missteps were present, the cultural impact of this show is significant to the development of a female same sexuality affirmative discourse in popular media.

## X. Starting the Conversation, Implementing a New Discourse

It is still my firm belief that television writers have a significant responsibility in helping shape the American population's perception of minority groups. The power they hold to create a new discourse is something that should not be taken lightly. My goal for this thesis is to empower the *reader* with the necessary knowledge to consider female same sex sexuality in society, but also on television. We should be able to attune ourselves to dialogue that confirms (and celebrates) the existence of queer women; regardless of its helpful or potentially harmful nature.

At this point, we understand that we must try to deconstruct the stereotypes of queer women perpetuated by television. Queer women must experience equality in sexuality, but also in struggles as well. Queer female characters must be on the same level with heterosexual female characters, just as they may be with queer male characters or heterosexual male characters.

However, we must also acknowledge that minority stress is a very real complication for minority groups. There are certain struggles that are specific to being a member of the LGBT community, and they further differentiate between sexual orientations/identities. We cannot make queerness invisible and call it "equality." We must talk about it, we must know that it exists. We must take that queerness and validate it.

As a culture, we should be working toward respect. The language we use to construct that respect must be inclusive of queer women, and all LGBT individuals for that matter. We need to use media literacy and queer television characters to implement a discourse that normalizes, supports and validates the existence of queerness.

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