“How else would I know what queer is?”
The impacts of the representation of queer women on television

Isabel Baskin
Advised by Professor Maya Nadkami
Swarthmore College Department of Sociology and Anthropology
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# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................. 4
Introduction........................................................................................................... 5
Chapter 1: Contextualizing Television and Case Studies in Representation: *Grey’s Anatomy* and *The L Word* ........................................................................................................ 11
Chapter 2: Television as Queer Possibility .......................................................... 40
Chapter 3: Imagining a Queer Community Through Television ....................... 55
Conclusion.............................................................................................................. 77
Works Cited........................................................................................................... 80
Abstract

Television has an important role in everyday life, providing representations of the social world and helping to construct the ways viewers understand their society. Representations of minority groups on television are particularly important, as they convey an image of people that viewers might not know personally. This thesis examines the ways in which queer women interact with television and employ media representations of queer women as tools to understand queer sexuality and queer communities. I conducted interviews with seven self-identified queer women about their experiences watching television and how this related to their own choice to identify as queer. I argue that television acts as a space of personal exploration for queer women, providing them with the tools to process queer sexuality on both a private and communal level. For the women that I spoke with, television acted as a tool that opened up new possibilities, creating potential futures that were unimaginable without queer representation. Television provided not just an emotional outlet, or leisurely entertainment, but a frame through which they could contextualize and understand queer sexuality in the real world. Though every woman expressed frustrations with various aspects of the representation of queer women on television, they also all told me about the various ways in which television had changed their lives, opening up possibilities and giving them a private space in which to both question and validate their sexuality.
Introduction

Motivation

I am not exaggerating when I say that the television show *Grey’s Anatomy* changed my life. I do not remember exactly when I started watching the show, but I do remember when I started to fall in love with Dr. Callie Torres and Dr. Arizona Robbins’ relationship. I did not know yet that I was gay; I did not understand that it was even possible for me to be attracted to a woman. What I did know, however, was that I could not get enough of Callie and Arizona.

I remember the pride that I felt when Callie famously exclaimed to her dad: “You can’t pray away the gay!” I remember the joy I felt during their wedding ceremony. I remember the pain I felt when Arizona cheated on Callie. Now, I no longer keep up with the show weekly, but I still care deeply about these characters. Over winter break this year, I caught up with the end of season twelve, crying as I watched Callie and Arizona fight through a bitter custody battle.

These characters are fictional, but the joy, sadness, and all the emotions in between that Callie and Arizona provoked in me are completely real. Television played a huge role in my understanding of queer sexuality, and *Grey’s Anatomy* provided just the example of a lesbian relationship that I needed to understand that I too could live a happy and fulfilling life as a queer woman.

This thesis is a deeply personal one. Since high school, I have been interested in the representation of queer people on television and the ways in which media affects its consumers. Because of my own experiences, I am fascinated by the portrayal of queer women on television and the various ways that queer women use television as a tool to understand queer sexuality.

I naively embarked on the research for this thesis expecting that most women would have a similar experience to mine. When I began conducting interviews, I realized quickly that this
was not the case. I heard many different stories. Though clear themes emerged from these interviews, each woman described a unique and personal relationship with television and other media that affected her understanding of her sexuality in a particular way. Hearing such a wide variety of experiences deepened my belief that television is an important tool for queer women in understanding sexuality. My experiences are no longer simply personal; I now have a much broader understanding of the ways in which representation on television affects queer women.

This thesis argues that television acts as a space of personal exploration for queer women, providing them with the tools to process queer sexuality on both a private and communal level. For the women that I spoke with, television acted as a tool that opened up new possibilities, creating potential futures that were unimaginable without queer representation. Television provided not just an emotional outlet, or leisurely entertainment, but a frame through which they could contextualize and understand queer sexuality in the real world. Though every woman expressed frustrations with various aspects of the representation of queer women on television, they also all told me about the various ways in which television had changed their lives, opening up possibilities and giving them a private space in which to both question and validate their sexuality.

**Methodology**

I began this research long ago, by watching television. Prior to starting the thesis, I had watched both *Grey’s Anatomy* and *The L Word* in their entireties. For this research in particular, I identified a few episodes of each show to re-watch closely and to examine the ways in which they represented queer sexuality and provided possible points of identification for queer viewers.
I also watched scattered episodes of other television shows that featured queer characters, like *Ellen* and *Queer as Folk*.

I worked to gain an understanding of the existing academic literature in this field. I focused on queer sexuality and the development of queer identity, the construction of queer communities, and sociological and communications studies research investigating the effects of media. My goal throughout this research was to understand how my informants’ responses reflected or challenged the existing literature on queer identification and media representation.

Throughout the fall 2016 semester, I conducted interviews with seven self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer women currently enrolled at Swarthmore College. I spoke with each of these women for about an hour, discussing their television watching habits, their process of coming to identify as something other than straight, and their feelings about the representation of queer women on television. It was a privilege to get a small glimpse of these women’s lives, learning more about how they understood and identified their sexuality. Each of the women I interviewed had a distinct personal connection to television. Getting to hear their stories and understand the ways in which television impacted their lives was meaningful; they all shared honest and often vulnerable reflections about their lives as queer women.

I selected these informants by posting an advertisement in the Reserved Student Digest. I also posted in the “Queer at Swat” Facebook group and emailed my Queer Media class to solicit participants. It is important to note that my informants were a self-selecting group; every person that signed up was necessarily interested in discussing the representation of queer women on television. This predisposition certainly affects my results. However, these women’s reactions are still valid in and of themselves: though they cannot speak for all queer women, they still provide important data about some queer women’s reactions to television.
The LGBTQ+ community is diverse, and every person has a different way of understanding and identifying their sexuality. My informants identified their sexuality in many different ways: lesbian, bisexual, queer, and pansexual. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the word “queer” as an umbrella term, encompassing anyone that identifies as anything other than heterosexual. Where appropriate, I use the terms that my informants use to identify themselves. I also use the phrase “queer identity” in a few places throughout the thesis. This term is meant to be used in a local way: to refer to the woman naming her own sexuality and choosing to identify as queer.

Of the seven informants, five were seniors, one was a sophomore, and one was a freshman. These women ranged in age from 18 to 22. They comprised a diverse set of academic majors, including subjects from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences.

The majority of women that I spoke with identified as mixed race. Only one of the women I spoke with identified as white. Although none of my questions explicitly addressed race, it is impossible to assume that race does not in some way affect the way these women interact with queer media. In some cases, my informants addressed this, explaining that their frustrations with queer representation were compounded by a lack of racial or ethnic diversity in media representations.

Throughout the interview process, I was constantly aware of my actions as both an interviewer and member of the queer community. As my informants pointed out, queer media is an important point of connection for many queer women, which did not change just because I was the interviewer. I had a certain camaraderie with the informants based on a shared identity and passion for queer television. Because of my “insider” status with this group, I was careful in my questions and responses, making sure that I did not assume anything about my informants’
answers. I was focused on making sure that they felt welcome to share their opinions. I did not want to assume that they felt a particular way about a certain show or character just because I, or other queer women, had a certain opinion. Overall, I think my openly queer identity helped facilitate my interviews, as I was able to connect with my informants and personally understand many of the situations they described.

It is especially important for me to mention that the women who chose to participate had to self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer. This leaves out a very important group: women who are questioning their sexuality or who are uncomfortable identifying as queer by signing up for an interview. Much of my analysis reflects upon the experiences of women who are still unsure of their sexuality. Though it is impossible to reach women who do not self-identify as queer, it is important to acknowledge the fact that many of the discussions I had with my informants reflected back upon their experiences before they identified as queer.

Chapter Overview

In the first chapter, “Contextualizing Television and Case Studies in Representation: Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word,” I consider the social history of television and the ways in which television has integrated into and affects daily life. To provide more concrete examples, I examine two shows in particular, Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word and analyze the ways in which their representations of queer women provide potential points of identification for queer viewers. This chapter argues that television plays an important role in teaching viewers about the real world, and in particular about queer people. Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word take different approaches to teaching viewers about queer lives, the former by contextualizing queer within a straight world, and the latter by bringing viewers into a queer world.
The second chapter introduces my informants, and demonstrates the ways in which they use television at an individual level to understand what queerness looks like in the real world. This chapter focuses on these women’s personal connections to television, and how creating these private spaces for themselves allowed them a place to explore their own queer sexuality. I argue that television provides an individualized space in which viewers can contextualize queer sexuality in the real world and consider their own sexuality in relation to these televisual representations.

The final chapter, “Imaging a Queer Community Through Television,” focuses on the transition of television from a private, individual space to a more community based point of interaction. I detail how my informants used television as a way to connect with other queer women, informing and contextualizing their interactions with a larger queer community. I argue that television creates a point of connection for queer women, providing them with ways to understand their own sexuality in relation to other queer women, even when they do not connect with queer women in the real world.
Chapter 1: Contextualizing Television and Case Studies in Representation: Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word

Why television?

Television is, for many people, an integral part of daily and domestic life. As Roger Silverstone explains in his book *Television and Everyday Life*, television “has found its way profoundly and intimately into the fabric of our daily lives” (Silverstone 1994:2). As a popular media platform, it has an “influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as...the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships” (Joyrich 2014:133). Television has proven itself as a significant part of the social world.

When television first became popular in the 1950s and 1960s, it occupied an important space in the home. “The television set moved into the center of family life,” reorganizing special dynamics in the home and replacing other furniture or appliances (Spigel 1992:38). This initial popularization of television resulted in both positive and negative critiques. Many found that it was an important part of domestic life: some “studies indicated that people believed television strengthened family ties” (Spigel 1992:44). However, there were also negative feelings about the new medium, mostly concerned with the technological power of television and its ability to influence children. It became clear that television might divide the family rather than unite it: different tastes for television might “send family members into separate worlds of pleasure and thus sever family ties” (Spigel 1992:66). This potential to divide continued to evolve with the introduction of cable in 1970s. Cable offered more niche channels “designed to capture a part of the market share that is under-marketed,” by targeting specific demographics ignored by broadcast television (Banet-Weiser 2007:9).
In more recent years, television trends have again shifted. The rise in popularity of streaming television online through sites like Hulu and Netflix allows viewers to watch shows whenever and wherever they want, often avoiding advertisements. This has also created the trend of ‘binge-watching’ a show: watching all (or many) episodes of a show at once. Though this change means that friends’ and family’s “viewing schedules may be out of sync,” it also allows viewers “to create a personalized programming menu” and choose what they would like to watch, both alone and with their family and friends (Matrix 2014:127). This personalization furthers the trend so feared in the earlier days of television: an increased segmentation of the family based on viewing interests. The increased power to choose what programs to watch does allow for a much more individualized viewing experience than a television set at the center of the living room, but does not necessarily take away the interactions that occur as a result of television. Matrix argues that this mode of consumption has created a “productively disruptive transformation in viewer-program relations” (Matrix 2014:133). Now, viewers have more active power over their television choices. Throughout the interviews in chapters two and three, I explore this more choice-focused mode of television watching through my informants’ experiences.

Television’s status within the home gives it the power to transmit particular stories and images to a wide audience, creating meaning within a larger context. In her book *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, Lila Abu-Lughod explains the various ways in which television shaped national identity in Egypt. Despite the introduction of a wider variety of channels, “the vast majority of the 69 million Egyptians leading such different lives… still tend to watch more or less the same television serials every evening” (Abu-Lughod 2005:6). The
central role of these shows in the lives of so many Egyptians indicates television’s larger scale impact, showing that television can be a significant part of the construction of a national culture.

On a more individual level, part of television’s role in daily life is that it allows viewers to create important and meaningful connections with the characters they watch. In “Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women’s Fantasy,” Ien Ang explores the relationship between the prime-time soap opera *Dallas* and its female viewers. She explains that television fiction, though potentially realistic, “is not a mere set of images to be read referentially, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy” (Ang 1997:162). These fictional representations are “collective and public fantasies” that allow viewers to “explore other situations, other identities, other lives” (Ang 1997:162). That is, television is not a simple representation, but an opportunity for personal connection and imagination. These possibilities for connection to both the characters and the fictional world of a television show indicate the emotional and personal potential of television as a medium.

Opportunities for emotional connection are further bolstered by television’s ability to reproduce itself each week, ensuring that viewers stay attached to the show. Popular television formats like the sitcom and the serial drama simultaneously solve and introduce problems within the world of the show, drawing viewers in by creating a desire to watch another episode (Feuer 1986:105). The constant duplication and reproduction of content, whether in sitcom or a more melodramatic serial, provides consistent and reliable opportunities for viewers to connect and identify with the characters. This quality is an integral part of the research presented in this thesis, as the women I interviewed discussed connections and attachments to particular characters they came to identify with over time.
The Power of Representation

The particular representations depicted on television often act as a tool that people use to make sense of the world around them. Not only does television provide images of the outside world, acting as a “key source of information,” but it also has the power to shape “viewers’ conceptions of social reality” (Gross 2001:6). Television teaches its audience about the world by exposing viewers to situations that they have not, and may never, experience in reality. Larry Gross’ book *Up From Invisibility* explains the ways in which queer people entered into society as a visible identity group and the ways that media affected this transformation. Gross explains that watching television allows the audience to form a “patched together” understanding of real-life situations, for events that range from “open-heart surgery” to “murder trials” (Gross 2001:11). Although viewers understand that the worlds depicted on television are not reality, they may still rely on these images as representations of real-life situations of which they do not have other knowledge or experience.

Television does not just teach viewers about specific situations they have never encountered, but also about the worlds in which they are immersed, transmitting lessons about society as a whole. Television is a representation of the world and its social dynamics, teaching people about societal rules and structures by playing out and reinforcing power dynamics on screen. Representations on television provide a way to understand what society looks like and teach viewers “what is normal, good, strange, or dangerous” (Capsuto 2000:1). In his book *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation*, Darrell Hamamoto argues that television is a tool often used to reinforce power structures that are lived in off-screen realities as well. In this way, television “confers legitimacy to white supremacist social institutions and power arrangements” that already exist in our society (Hamamoto 1994: xi). The
fact that viewers see these power structures play out both in their lived experiences and on television is important because it continues to reinforce them as norms that do not need to be challenged.

How are minority groups, then, treated by and represented in television, and how does this affect their role within society? It is important to note that in general, the images presented in the media are representations of the “majority groups in our society” (Gross 2001:11). Some of these representations occur because the people that have power to create television are “mostly white, mostly middle aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual (at least in public)” (Gross 2001:5). Although this is beginning to change, this is still a problem today. Television representations project an image of people in minority groups to the world. These images have an effect on how these groups perceive themselves and are perceived by the rest of society.

One of the biggest trends in media representation for all minorities is a sheer lack of representation. This is a problem for queer people as well. According to the annual Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) report, “Where we are on TV,” LGBTQ characters make up 4.8% of regular characters on scripted broadcast series (GLAAD 2016:6). While the report notes that this is the highest percentage ever recorded, it is still relatively low. GLAAD does not keep track of percentages outside of broadcast networks, but they do count numbers of LGBTQ characters, and they found 92 LGBTQ characters on cable (GLAAD 2016:8) and 45 on streaming networks (GLAAD 2016:10). Both numbers are higher than the previous year’s counts. Quantity of representation is important to consider because of the ways that television represents how viewers understand their social world. If there are hardly any
LGBTQ characters on television, it will communicate to the viewer that LGBTQ people are not common in the real world.

The problem with including so few minority characters on television shows is often presented as one of visibility: the audience cannot see characters of a certain race, gender, ethnicity, etc., because they do not appear on screen. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people present an interesting complication for minority group representation because sexual orientation is considered invisible. The identity itself does not necessarily have anything to do with how a person looks, but it can impact self-presentation. The queer community has also developed some outward cultural signifiers that communicate sexuality visually. Although appearance has the ability to communicate sexual orientation, outward expression is not sufficient to identify a character on screen as queer. So in order to achieve real queer representation, the characters must be developed enough or have a clear enough storyline to indicate their sexuality.

Once queer characters exist on a show, it is necessary to think about how these representations work on screen: how these characters are portrayed, how other characters on the show treat them, and what kinds of storylines they get. One of the biggest problems with representation is the reliance on stereotypes. The continued use of stereotypes creates the idea that everyone from a certain group dresses, acts, or speaks a certain way, among other things. These assumptions are harmful, because they imply something, whether positive or negative, about all members of a group, impacting the way others perceive them. They also limit opportunities for viewers find points of identification with a character. If every queer character is the same, this only gives a small section of a queer audience a chance to personally identify with any given queer character.
In his article “Out from the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and Mass Media,” Larry Gross explains that the media plays a huge role in defining gay people as an embodiment of a stereotype: “media characterizations use popular stereotypes as a code” (Gross 1991:27) rather than actually exploring other aspects of a character’s personality. He continues to explain that this is harmful in two ways: first by showing gay (and straight) viewers that gay people are “weak” or “evil” and also by reinforcing the idea that gay people are not “normal” or “unexceptional” (Gross 1991:30). Gross furthers his point by stating, “Hardly ever shown in the media are just play 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” (Gross 1991:30). Gross argues that gay characters’ roles are usually heavy roles that hinge upon their sexuality challenging society’s moral code. This furthers the perception that gay people are an “evil” threat to society rather than fostering the idea that gay people’s sexuality in reality does not affect anyone but themselves.

While stereotypes are often considered unanimously bad, they can serve some social functions. Stereotypes do the work of conjuring up social knowledge about a particular group quickly, often without more than a glance (Dyer 2002:23). In some ways, this can be helpful simply for the purpose of visibility. While Dyer acknowledges that this kind of representation can be harmful, it is also powerful because it “never allows the text to closet her or him, and it thus allows gay sub-cultural perspectives to always be present in a scene” (Dyer 2002:22-24). Visible stereotypes require viewers to acknowledge the fact that a character is queer, and in some ways having this identity become visible as long as the character is on screen ensures that viewers cannot ignore the queer dynamics at play in the scene.
Despite the limited benefits of stereotypes, representations that move beyond portrayals that simply rely on stereotypes and harmful tropes are important because they communicate that queerness is not just one specific type of person. When television represents anything, whether it is a person or event, it is a representation that “place[s] the events and issues with particular contexts and encourage[s] the audiences to understand them in particular ways” (McCullagh 2002:25). That is, television does not just provide a quantitative representation of a particular group, but a way of understanding and interpreting this group within the social world. This is especially important to consider in the context of identity development. Since these representations offer particular ways for the audience to understand a minority group, they also offer particular ways for the audience to identify with these characters.

Diving into Television

Because I interviewed women that are all close in age, their comments reflect their experiences living in a particular social, cultural, and political climate. Though seeing queer people on television is still relatively novel for them, they can name many shows with queer characters and each have some characters and shows in which they are personally invested. In order to contextualize their comments and place their experiences within a larger framework of queer television, I present a brief history of queer representation on television.

The path to achieving some sort of queer representation on television started slowly. To provide a background for current queer television, I draw from both Stephen Capsuto and Susana Walters' histories of queer representations on television in their respective books Alternate Channels: the uncensored story of gay and lesbian images on radio and television and All The Rage: the story of gay visibility in America. Though the current television landscape is the result
of all types of gay and lesbian representation, I focus more on the representation of queer women in order to better contextualize the way my informants discuss their experiences.

Until the mid 1960s, there was an extreme lack of queer representation on television, save for “a few neurotic and/or violent lesbian roles” (Capsuto 2000:4). In the late 1960s, however, queer representation increased as networks began to seek a young, urban, college educated audience embroiled in heated social issues of the time (Capsuto 2000:4). Most of the characters portrayed were young, white, gay men, often put into comedies. Lesbians continued to be portrayed as violent (Capsuto 2000:4). In the 1970s, shows with queer characters settled on two main “genres” (Capsuto 2000:4). These were either a character’s personal coming out narrative, or a portrayal of a gay character as a “killer or child molester” (Capsuto 2000:5). These negative portrayals incited protests from gay organizations, eventually resulting in network executives agreeing to “avoid stereotypes” and receive input from openly gay consultants when creating shows (Capsuto 2000:5). These actions resulted in a relative abundance of queer characters, many of whom were “squeaky-clean” characters, nobly fighting discrimination (Capsuto 2000:5).

The AIDS epidemic in the 1980s signaled a shift in representation. AIDS created more serious representations of gay men on television “through becoming the objects of pity and sympathy” (Walters 2001:61). Many representations of people with AIDS focused on them as villains, “bottom feeding snakes who irresponsibly and knowingly spread ‘the plague’” (Walters 2001:61). Depictions of gay men in the context of AIDS were also notable in their “absence of queer culture” and “refusal to engage in the community context of gay men” (Walters 2001:61). Walters points out that this trend continues today, as queer characters are often depicted as being isolated from any larger queer culture.
The 80s presented some increase in lesbian representation. *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989), a show about two divorced women living together, “was notable for its obvious lesbian subtext and adamantly refusal to ever make the subtext visible” (Walters 2001:62). The 80s also brought the show *Dynasty* that aired from 1981 to 1989. The show featured a gay male character, Steven, who Walters describes as one of the “most well-known gay (if not well-loved) gay TV characters” (Walters 2001:63). The first recurring lesbian character in the United States appeared in 1988 on ABC’s *Heartbeat* and the first kiss between two women on television was in 1991 on *L.A. Law* (Beirne 2008:4).

There was “a startling increase of gay-themed programming” in the 1990s (Becker 2006:3). Between 1994 and 1997, 40 percent of primetime network series had a gay themed episode (Becker 2006:3). This visibility on television was in part a reflection of the wider visibility of queer people in United States during the 1990s. Walters partially attributes this visibility to the Clinton presidency and its gay friendly campaign and policies (Walters 2001:31). In his book *Gay TV and Straight America*, Ron Becker explains this shift in television representation as the result of a “straight panic” that occurred as “categories of sexual identity” were contested in the cultural sphere (Becker 2006:4). Becker also argues that this shift was a result of the increasing importance of targeting niche markets in the media (Becker 2006:9).

Arguably one of the most important events for queer representation happened in 90s. In 1997, both Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen Morgan in the sitcom *Ellen* came out, “marking the first time an openly gay character emerged to headline a series” (Walters 2001:84). On April 6th, Ellen DeGeneres came out publicly on the cover of *Time*, with the famous headline “Yep, I’m Gay” The coming out episode of her show, entitled “The Puppy Episode,” was hyped in the media months before its airdate at the end of April. In February, ABC announced that
Ellen would be coming out, but kept the content top-secret: “all drafts were kept in locked safe, printed on hard-to-read red safety paper” (Capsuto 2000:391). The show was so highly anticipated that “ABC was able to sell ad time at twice Ellen’s usual rate” (Capsuto 2000:391). The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) created free kits including Ellen trivia, posters, and HRC marketing materials; GLAAD held multiple “gala fund-raising parties” at which the episode was screened (Capsuto 2000:393).

The show, separated into two 30-minute parts, centers her coming out narrative on the return of an old boyfriend, Richard, who attempts to reconnect with her while on a business trip. Instead, Ellen realizes she clicks with his boss Susan, who comes out to Ellen. When Susan admits that she thought Ellen was also gay, Ellen panics, vehemently denying the possibility of her being gay and quickly and awkwardly exits the room. The rest of the episode focuses on Ellen’s personal understanding of her sexuality, partially communicated through sessions with her therapist, played by Oprah. At the end of the first part, Ellen rushes to the airport and comes out to Susan – comically, she also comes out to everyone waiting to board the plane as she mistakenly leans into the microphone.

Though the topic is serious, DeGeneres’ comedy shines through: the show is funny and self-aware. The first episode opens with Ellen’s friends yelling to her, “Are you ever going to come out?” After a while, Ellen peeks her head out of the door saying, “Come on, I’ve got a whole hour!” The show also pokes fun at the idea that queer representation on television could change someone’s sexuality. In one of her therapy sessions, Ellen starts talking about all of the women in the past she’s been attracted to. “I never should have rented Personal Best,” she sighs, referencing a movie that features lesbian relationship. Her therapist comforts her: “You can’t blame this on the media, Ellen.”
As Rebecca Beirne points out in her short summary of Ellen’s impact on queer television, not everyone is “comfortable with...the unambiguous narrative of progress” surrounding Ellen’s coming out (Beirne 2008:5). Walters points out that one of the biggest flaws of the episode is its focus on homosexuality as a rejection of heterosexuality. Ellen’s ‘realization’ about her sexuality is framed by “the absence of heterosexual desire” for her ex-boyfriend (Walters 2001:83). The episode creates the feeling that Ellen must somehow prove her attraction to women by proving her lack of attraction to men.

Another common critique of *Ellen* is its lack of politicization of the coming out story. Ellen herself explained in an interview: “I didn't do it to make a political statement. I did it selfishly for myself and because I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view” (Handy 1997). This sentiment frustrates Walters, who argues that this first stage of Ellen’s coming out was a “timid plea for acceptance” (Walters 2001:82). The coming out episode revolves around Ellen’s personal feelings rather than politics as it depicts Ellen ‘discovering’ her ‘authentic sexuality.’ In her article “Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility,” Bonnie Dow argues that this sentiment of self-discovery was a key aspect of both Ellen DeGeneres’ and Ellen Morgan’s coming out. Both DeGeneres’ interviews and the character Ellen Morgan’s “revelations were couched in terms of her personal discovery or recovery of authenticity; she was revealing her ‘true’ self to the public” (Dow 2001:126).

Dow frames this discussion around Foucault’s analysis of the ways in which society’s discussion of sexuality constructs a particular understanding of it. Ellen’s authenticity narrative demonstrates the “discursive construction of that sexuality... [and] our understanding of what gay visibility can and cannot be allowed to mean in commercial media” (Dow 2001:124). The emphasis on personal narrative in many ways depoliticizes Ellen’s coming out, making it about
her own feelings rather than gay visibility or a fight for equality. However, Walters notes that the
show slowly transformed into a more nuanced representation of gay life, as it started to
“reinforce the ongoing nature of coming out and the ongoing realities of anti-gay practices”
(Walters 2001:85). She argues that likely the most important thing about Ellen was simply its
“presence: whether or not you liked the show, or thought it was funny, or thought it tedious, the
vision of some sort of gay life being depicted in prime time was exhilarating” (Walters 2001:93).
The show only survived one season after Ellen came out and was cancelled in 1998. DeGeneres
spoke out about this cancellation, arguing that it was the result of homophobia (Walters
2001:93).

*Queer as Folk* is a television series about a group of gay men that was originally a British
show. After success in Britain, it got picked up by Showtime and remade for American television
in 2000. Rather than focusing on a few gay characters within a straight world, in *Queer as Folk*
“the dramatic lens was trained on the gay characters and their world, with only token straight
characters” (Gross 2001:181). The show was “largely aimed at gay audiences” (Gross 2001:182).
*Queer As Folk* got mixed reviews; some thought that the sexualized depictions of gay men were
important while others thought that the show was too focused on sex and drugs to represent gay
life positively (Frei 2012:81). Walters also argues that the show ignores the community aspect of
gay life: the show “seems to substitute sexuality for community” (Walters 2001:122).

*Queer as Folk* paved the way for Showtime’s next queer series, *The L Word*, which ran
from 2004-2009. The “unapologetically lesbian centered” (McFadden 2014:3) show follows a
group of queer women living in Los Angeles, focusing mostly on their love lives and friendships.
Like *Queer as Folk*, the show exists in a queer world, flipping the script by making straight
characters the odd ones out. In the lesbian world of the show, “characters participate in a rich
Almost every woman I spoke with throughout my interview process mentioned *The L Word* as an important representation of lesbians. Its status as a cultural symbol in lesbian television is clear, even though the show ended years ago.

Though *The L Word*’s depictions of queer women overshadow many other representations of the time period, there were other representations of queer women throughout the 2000s on many, often mainstream television shows. In her article “Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams,” Lynne Joyrich discusses the new tensions surrounding the current study of ‘queer television.’ Examining television as queer requires reconciling the “mainstream” qualities of television with queerness, which is often “defined precisely as the subversion of the ordinary” (Joyrich 2014:134). However, television is becoming more “intriguing in its concepts and politics” and “complex in its storylines” (Joyrich 2014:135). Joyrich argues that as television adds more queer characters, the changes in the ways shows are written and structured also “queer” the mainstream in some ways (Joyrich 2014:135).

This is the context in which my informants understand queer television. Though they certainly expressed frustration with a lack of queer characters, most of their complaints dealt with the quality of the representations rather than their absence. Their focus on analyzing the ways in which these characters are portrayed and how they fit into both straight and queer culture exemplify Joyrich’s comments about queer television studies today.

**Case Studies: Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word**

How do these images serve as points of identification for viewers at an individual level? How do viewers convert these images of social reality into personal stories? In order to more
carefully consider the ways in which social reality in terms of queerness is constructed on television, this thesis will examine two popular television shows that feature queer women, *Grey's Anatomy* and *The L Word*. I will focus particularly on the ways in which these shows portray queer characters as part of the larger social world and on the ways these representations offer potential points of identification for queer viewers.

I choose to focus on these two shows in particular because they present very different representations of queer women, offering viewers very different potential points of identification. *Grey's Anatomy*'s central focus is not queerness; rather, a few queer characters are a part of a mostly straight regular cast. The show offers a vision of queer people as a typical part of society and provides many ways for both queer and straight viewers to understand queer sexuality as a part of daily life. In contrast, *The L Word* creates an isolated queer world, where almost every character in the show is a lesbian. Rather than focusing on the similarities between queer and straight people, the show often emphasizes the differences, providing the viewer with what feels like an inside look on queer female culture in Los Angeles. The contrast between these two shows provides a good way to demonstrate the different ways in which shows that feature queer female characters provide points of identification for queer viewers.

*Grey’s Anatomy*

*Grey’s Anatomy* is the first of popular television writer Shonda Rhimes’ hit primetime shows. The show airs on ABC as part of their Thursday night lineup dubbed “Shondaland” that includes Rhimes’ two other shows, *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*. *Grey’s Anatomy* first aired in 2005 and is currently in its thirteenth season. The main cast is a group of doctors who enter Seattle Grace Hospital as interns, and the show follows them throughout their
careers. *Grey's Anatomy* has many aspects of a classic soap opera, following the complicated, overly dramatic, and impossibly entangled romantic lives of the doctors and patients. But what is notable and important about *Grey's Anatomy* is its diversity. In its first season, *Grey's Anatomy* included nine main characters, of which four were women and four were people of color. Three of the four people of color were high-ranking doctors, including chief of surgery. The majority of the white characters are low-ranking interns. This alone is significant, and it is clear that Rhimes makes an effort to cast people who accurately reflect our diverse society.

It took a few seasons for queer characters to appear regularly on *Grey's Anatomy*. There are various small, episode-length storylines involving gay parents or characters, but no recurring cast members are identified as queer until season four. In season four, Dr. Callie Torres, who came on the show as a series regular in season two, begins a relationship with a female doctor. She was previously married to a male doctor, and was never identified on the show as bisexual until she began this relationship with a woman. After this short-lived relationship, Callie begins a serious relationship with another woman, Dr. Arizona Robbins, whom she ultimately marries in season seven. This relationship undergoes numerous dramatic obstacles: Callie and Arizona go through a tough divorce, and later a vicious custody battle. At the end of season twelve, Callie Torres leaves the show.

How does *Grey’s Anatomy* represent these queer women and relationships? How does it provide potential points of identification for queer viewers? One of the most notable parts of Rhimes’ writing, and *Grey’s Anatomy* in particular, is how nonchalantly the characters’ diversity fits into the storyline. This diversity is successful because Rhimes understands that casting diverse actors is not where the work ends: this diversity itself is not an excuse to ignore social tensions in her scripts. Rhimes confronts racism, sexism, and homophobia head on though her
characters' interactions. At one point in season twelve, two of the main characters, one African-American and one white, get into a discussion about race. When Amelia, a white character, thinks she might have offended another African-American doctor, she asks Maggie, an African-American character, about it, expressing her discomfort by saying, “I hate that this [race] is even an issue all of a sudden.” Maggie uses this opportunity to explain that race is not “suddenly” an issue, and details some of the racist microaggressions she often faces. This scene is powerful because it directly addresses race and the way that it affects the characters’ relationships to each other. Maggie explicitly tells Amelia that racism “is all over.” When Amelia points out that she did not even notice that her actions might have been racist, Maggie says, “then notice it.” Their conversation feels honest: Amelia initially resists admitting her mistake and hesitates to ask Maggie because she feels nervous. Maggie’s character is not just there to tell a story about racism; she admits that it is “annoying” to have to speak to her white friend about this issue and reminds Amelia that she does not “speak for all black people.” Scenes like these make Rhimes’ characters and their emotions feel real, even when the situations in which they find themselves become too dramatic to be believable.

Callie Torres does not identify as bisexual when she first enters the show in season two. As Callie enters her first relationship with a woman in season four, she goes through a process of redefining her sexuality. This process provides an opportunity for viewers who are also questioning their sexuality to identify with her struggle while simultaneously providing reassurance, given through the words and actions of other characters, that her attraction to another woman is valid. In season four episode thirteen, Addison, a recurring character, arrives at the hospital to visit. She meets Dr. Erica Hahn and senses chemistry between Erica and Callie. She mentions this to Callie, asking her if she has started “speaking the vagina monologues.”
Callie is surprised by this suggestion, laughing nervously and denying the possibility of this queer relationship. But Addison continues to prod her, saying that she and Erica are acting like “a really happy couple.” That Addison offers this suggestion and is excited about the prospect of Callie and Erica dating validates Callie’s romantic and sexual thoughts about Erica.

In the fifteenth episode of season four, Callie has her first kiss with a woman when Erica kisses her in the elevator. Although the kiss came at the prodding of male doctor Mark Sloan, Callie had previously been thinking about Erica in a romantic and sexual way. Erica walks out of the elevator and away from the kiss, leaving Callie and Mark alone in the elevator. The frame focuses on Callie’s dazed expression, and when the elevator stops at the next floor Mark walks out. As the shot centers on Callie, her jaw hangs open and her eyes open wide. She pauses as she walks out of the elevator, shaking her head as if to try and make sense of her feelings about the kiss.

In the second episode of season five, Callie gathers up the courage to ask Erica on a date. It is clear that her nerves are partially because she is unsure what to make of this new, queer territory. But this nervousness is not for fear of rejection from the other characters in the show. Right before she asks Erica on the date, her friend Mark Sloan, who previously prodded them to kiss, encourages her. The tone of this budding romance encourages the audience to root for Callie. When she and Erica finally fully acknowledge their feelings for each other in the second episode of season five, the moment is tender. Both admit that they are each other’s first same-sex kiss, and that they have been “freaking out” about it. The scene ends with a kind of tacit understanding that the two will continue to explore the relationship further, with Callie saying to Erica, “Hey, we can be scared together.” The moment is sweet in its innocence, as both admit they are unsure what to make of their newfound same-sex attraction. However, it still powerfully
represents their sexuality by communicating their excitement for their budding relationship and potential future together. The dialogue acknowledges the fear and nervousness that can accompany questioning one’s sexuality, as Callie tells Erica, “I’m not even sure I like kissing girls.” Simultaneously, by ending the interaction on a positive note as they walk out of the frame together, smiling, the scene communicates that this relationship makes them happy, and that it will be pursued in the future.

After Callie’s relationship with Erica ends, she begins to date Arizona. This relationship is treated as any other on the show, which is central to the way that Rhimes writes queer sexuality into *Grey’s Anatomy*. One of the most important things that Rhimes does in order to fit Callie and Arizona into the storyline is to parallel their relationship with the storylines of other couples on the show. In a sense, this makes Callie and Arizona ‘just like’ a straight couple. There are certainly problems with normalizing queerness by simply equating queer couples to straight couples: equality should not depend on a queer couple’s ability to mimic heterosexuality. Queer couples also face different challenges than straight couples, and completely equating queer and straight couples erases their different experiences. *Grey’s Anatomy* does a good job of continually acknowledging the fact that Callie and Arizona have parallels to the straight relationships on the show, but still continue to face unique difficulties, including homophobia from family members and challenges getting married.

This normalization of Callie and Arizona is particularly apparent in one episode in season six, “Invest in Love.” As the title suggests, the episode, among other medical drama, follows the romantic struggles of some of the couples in the show. The episode opens on a scene of a sleeping couple in bed together as a pager goes off, then pans to another, almost identical scene. The first couple is Meredith Grey and her husband Derek Shepherd, and the second is Callie and
Arizona. The transition between the two scenes is smooth, suggesting nothing unusual about the switch from a heterosexual couple in bed together to two women in bed together. Besides just showing that this romantic, and implied sexual, relationship, is a nonissue, these two shots clearly reinforce the parallel between Meredith and Derek’s relationship and Callie and Arizona’s. There is nothing different about these two relationships. The episode continues to parallel Callie and Arizona to other couples in the show. One scene begins with a fight between Callie and Arizona. As they argue, Cristina Yang and her boyfriend, Owen Hunt, walk into the apartment arguing. The fights ends with both Owen and Arizona storming out of the apartment and Cristina looking at Callie angrily and commiserating about their relationship struggle, sighing and saying, “bitches.” Again, this parallel scene suggests that the couples are the same, and that there is nothing remarkable about the fact that one of the couples is made up of two women. This sentiment is fairly universal throughout the duration of Callie and Arizona’s relationship, and is further highlighted by Rhimes so obviously paralleling their relationship with a heterosexual one.

The fact that Rhimes goes through such effort to make Callie and Arizona just like any other couple on the show is important as a potential point of identification for queer viewers. Grey’s Anatomy makes a clear point that queer people are just like anyone else. This is an important counter to the often-stereotypical images of queer women a viewer might see. The fact that Callie and Arizona are “just play gay folk,” like Gross explains in his article, is important because it reinforces the fact that queer sexuality does not define a person’s character in a particular way. Since it is a medical drama, there is plenty of serious, high-stress drama in the in the show. But Grey’s lets this drama be the focus: the show is scary because a character has a medical emergency, not because queer sexuality is disrupting the moral order of the hospital.
One of my informants, who will be introduced fully in the final chapter, pointed this out to me: “It was kind of nice that [queer sexuality] wasn't the theme of the show. It was like, look they're doctors, they're doing this. And the high drama portion of it was more like, this person's dying or this person's trapped in cement.” This is a powerful message for Grey’s Anatomy to send because it gives viewers a chance to imagine how queer people fit into the larger society in a positive way. It also challenges the representation of queer people as a “threat to the moral order” (Gross 1991:30). Not only does it demonstrate that queer women are typical part of the world, but that they positively contribute to the world by literally saving lives. For queer viewers, this provides an important point of identification because it communicates that queer sexuality does not negatively impact a person’s relationships to those around them and that queer people are not just a typical, but also integral part of society.

Despite the delay in including queer characters (Callie did not come out as bisexual until season five), Grey’s Anatomy represents these queer characters similarly to all other characters on the show. Queer characters get their own relationships and drama, just as the straight characters do. It is notable Rhimes strikes a balance between ‘normalizing’ the queer characters and carefully addressing their particular issues. Rhimes does not attempt to ignore some of the difficult aspects of queer sexuality, like Callie’s confusion and questioning, or her interactions with her homophobic parents. However, Callie’s storylines do not revolve solely around these struggles. This balance provides an important point of connection for queer viewers who are still unsure of their sexuality and unsure what their lives might look like in the future. This reassurance that queer people are a typical part of society, while not completely disregarding the particular challenges that queer people face is valuable because it provides a template, to both
queer and straight viewers, of how queer people fit into society in a way that is completely positive, rather than “evil” (Gross 1991:30).

The L Word

While many shows like Grey’s Anatomy work to fit queer narratives into the larger, straight, world of the show, other shows instead choose to create an entirely queer world that appears to function parallel to the outside straight world. The L Word constructs an almost entirely lesbian world as it follows a group of queer women friends living in West Hollywood. The show begins as new girl Jenny moves into the neighborhood with her fiancée Tim. The viewer becomes acquainted to the neighborhood along with Jenny, who slowly realizes that almost everyone is a lesbian. Throughout the show’s six seasons, The L Word constructs a world in which queerness is the norm, building up a lesbian universe for the viewer. The show’s focus on creating this lesbian world, distinct from the straight world, makes for different possible points of identification for queer viewers. Rather than focusing on achieving harmony and tolerance within a larger straight society, The L Word instead focuses on creating a kind of queer utopia for queer viewers, putting them in a totally queer world they likely have not and will not get the chance to inhabit.

In her essay “Having It All Ways: The Tourist, the Traveler, and the Local in ‘The L Word,’” Candace Moore advocates an understanding of The L Word as a ‘tour’ through the lesbian world that provides different perspectives of viewing and understanding a culture: as a tourist, a traveler, and a local. Most obviously, the straight viewer acts as the tourist, who slowly becomes more familiar with lesbian culture as he or she watches the show, transforming into a traveler by season two (Moore 2007:6). It follows that the lesbian viewer is the local, but Moore
argues that the lesbian viewer is in some ways both a tourist (she enjoys the “eye candy”) and a traveler (she seeks “authentic” representation). Though the lesbian viewer in some ways shares the same culture as the lesbian characters on the show, Moore argues that she cannot quite act as a local because the world depicted on *The L Word* is fictional, and “the mediated reality of the show will never match up to reality” (Moore 2007:7). Understanding *The L Word* as a kind of ethnographic portrait of lesbian life allows us to understand the construction of the show’s totally separate, and almost fantastical lesbian world.

This lesbian world is introduced through the character Jenny, as the series begins when Jenny moves to West Hollywood (and into this new lesbian world). One of the first scenes in the episode features the main characters gathering in a coffee shop, which seems like a morning ritual for them. As we will later learn, the coffee shop is called The Planet, indicative of the separate lesbian world in which they live. As Jenny arrives in the neighborhood (Tim moved in earlier), she remarks that the neighborhood is “traditional,” to which Tim replies, “it’s not as traditional as you might think.” This directly foreshadows the world that the viewer (and Jenny) is about to get to know. Jenny’s introduction to the show provides a way for this new lesbian world to be constructed for the viewer. Rather than throwing the viewer right into this alternate world, she gets to learn through Jenny, and understand everything at her pace. The use of Jenny’s character is also important in that it sets up the lesbian world to have an inside and an outside. Jenny, and the viewer, learn about this world from the outside, and are slowly enveloped into this world throughout the first season.

Jenny’s first introduction to the lesbian world happens when she looks out from the porch and sees two women having sex in her neighbor’s pool. Jenny gazes out onto this scene, taking it all in, and seems to understand what Tim means in saying that the neighborhood is not so
traditional. She is shocked, but continues to stare on from afar throughout the encounter. This introduction to the lesbian world is about as much from the outside as possible: she is literally staring on from a distance, taking in the scene through the slits in the fence. The camera pans up to show the scene from above as well, alternating between Jenny’s obscured view through the fence and the all-knowing, bird’s eye view. Jenny literally must look through a fence to see the lesbian world; she is physically separated from it. This solidifies her positionality as an outsider in this world. As the pilot, and the rest of season one, progress, Jenny slowly makes her way to the other side of the metaphorical fence, diving fully into the lesbian world that she was previously blocked from and taking the viewer with her.

Jenny’s positionality in this scene and throughout the show’s first couple of seasons provides a way for the show to “acculturate its straight viewership” (Moore 2007:5). In this pool scene, Jenny literally looks on from afar, taking pleasure in watching lesbian sex. Though on the surface this scene is set up as fetishizing queer sexuality for a straight gaze, Jenny’s female gaze “queers the trope of straight male pleasure in fantasizing lesbian sex” (Moore 2007:8). Moore points out that this flips the script in two ways: by privileging female desire through feminizing the traditionally male gaze and by subtly queering female viewers as they watch the scene. By setting up the lesbian sex scene as the initial point of desire, The L Word forces straight (male) viewers to engage in the “representational translation well known to queers – that of eroticizing a scenario without necessarily recognizing oneself as a viable subject within it” (Moore 2007:10). This forced translation, through Jenny’s eyes, provides a literal visual entry point to straight (male) viewers as they embark on their “tour” through the lesbian world.

The separation and construction of Jenny as an outsider continue to create opportunities for outsiders to be folded into the lesbian world of the show. Throughout season one and two,
“straight viewers continue to have, through Jenny, a liminal vehicle that allows them to view the world of The L Word from a safely ambiguous place” (Moore 2007:17). Because Jenny straddles the lesbian and straight worlds, she continually provides points of entry to straight viewers: Jenny “is the initial bearer of the tourist’s gaze” (Moore 2007:17). However, as she becomes immersed into the drama of the world, she changes, and “her initial gaze comes finally to represent the queer spectator’s gaze” (Moore 2007:19). While I agree with Moore’s assessment of Jenny’s transformation and function within the show, Moore lacks a discussion of an important group that Jenny’s liminal positionality targets: women who have not yet chosen to identify their sexuality. Jenny’s flirtation with a queer sexuality and identity throughout the first season provide many points of identification for viewers who are in a similar liminal space. Moore explains that The L Word’s success relies on “heteroflexibility,” described as “the ability to access desires and senses multiply” (Moore 2007:20). This ability of heterosexual viewers to be flexible and take on a different identity as they watch television allows the show to appeal to a broader audience. Moore’s argument of heteroflexibility helps explain the “cultivation of the touristic gaze” (Moore 2007:20) that allows straight viewers to identify with and be immersed in the lesbian world of the show. However, it also discounts the potential queerness in many of the show’s viewers. Viewers who exist in a liminal space and have not yet chosen to identify their sexuality employ this same ‘flexibility’ in their identification with the show, but, I would argue, do not just take on this flexibility as a result of the show’s perspective. Jenny’s positionality is not just a liminal space between two worlds, but an important perspective of its own, one that allows for the existence of flexibility without tying it to a purely straight or queer gaze.

The creation of the queer world itself is important for the queer viewer, as an exclusively queer world is not particularly common in television. Queer characters in other shows are often
folded into the straight action of the show, and even if they are portrayed as total equals, they are still required to fit into the straight framework in which the rest of the show operates. For example, *Grey’s Anatomy* provides positive portrayals of queer women within straight society, but does not challenge the social order of the show’s world. *The L Word* provides an alternative vision for the queer viewer, showing her that queer lives are not just another option, but can also be a totally different lifestyle.

After the show has successfully set up this lesbian world, it demonstrates the ways in which it interacts with the straight world, making clear that it is not a subset of the straight world, but in fact its own world that cannot be fit into or merged with a straight social world. In season four, one of the main characters, Tina, begins to date a man, Henry. She decides to have a cocktail party with her lesbian friends and her new straight friends that she has met through her boyfriend Henry. The party is presented as awkward before it even begins, as Bette, Tina’s ex and the other mother of their child, discusses it with their friend Alice on the phone. The scene shows Bette on the phone laughing, exclaiming “Oh my god, that sounds awful. She did not say, ‘a mixer for our gay and our straight friends!’” Right away, the party is presented as a mixing of two opposite groups; one that Bette knows is going to be uncomfortable.

The dinner party scene opens with a close up of one of the Tina’s new straight friends as she stares at the group of lesbians, the main cast of the show. The group of straight people is surprised that the group of very attractive women is entirely made up of lesbians. As Tina confirms, for what seems like the tenth time, that they are indeed lesbians, Bette walks into the party. After an awkward encounter between Bette and Tina, the focus moves over to the group of lesbians as Bette joins them. Alice is immediately relieved, exclaiming, “Thank god you’re here, we’re totally outnumbered!” After a few minutes of discussion, Alice scans the party and says,
“All right, you guys, grace period’s up. I’m going in,” further showing that the group is on the outside of the party, not actually being mixed in as Tina intended.

The language the women use reinforces this strict division between the two groups. When Alice claims that they are “outnumbered,” this implies that there is some sort of competition, or at least something at stake for which these two teams must be even. This is echoed with her later statement of, “I’m going in.” Her words imply that the two groups do not just occupy different spaces in the party, but that the lesbians are actually on the outside while the straight people are on the inside.

The final scene that the episode depicts of the dinner party is a game of celebrity, where one person picks a name out of a hat and gives clues so that their partner can guess who it is. We first see Alice pick a name out of the hat and excitedly say, “Oh, we won already, this is so easy,” before beginning to describe the person she picked. She then begins to give clues, one of which is “major dyke – she came out big time in 2000, I mean we already knew,” which throws off her straight partner. The lesbian friends all shake their heads knowingly, equally as surprised that the man does not know who Alice is describing. When the timer is up, Alice reveals that it was the actress Lily Tomlin, which surprises and confuses all of the straight people. We then see a parallel scene as Jenny picks up a slip of paper and reads it, confused. “I don’t know who Terrell Owens is,” she says. The lesbians all look around at each other in agreement while the straight people stare on, aghast. “He’s the most talented receiver in football!” one man exclaims, while another straight woman says, “He appeared with a desperate housewife in a commercial!” None of this helps the group of lesbians understand, and the scene ends as Bette and Shane decide to leave the “excruciating” game.
The game of celebrity provides the last piece of evidence in this episode proving the division between the gay and straight groups. The game itself is built on the premise of a shared knowledge of pop culture, something that is supposed to be mass marketed and almost universally relevant. However, it is immediately clear that this is not the case for the lesbian and straight groups. Their complete inability to share information about celebrities that both groups think are obvious points to the division between gay and straight worlds in *The L Word*. One of the most telling moments is when one of the straight women explains that Terrell Owens appeared in a commercial with an actress from *Desperate Housewives*. The woman is trying to create a connection to Jenny through popular media marketed towards women by mentioning a show that was extremely popular for women at that time. But Helena, another lesbian, is utterly confused by this, asking blankly into the group, “*Desperate Housewives*...?” This reinforces that the division at this party is not between men and women, but between gay and straight. Although the lesbians exist in a world made up of entirely women, they still are not able to connect with the straight woman on her reference to female pop culture.

The fact that this cocktail party makes clear such a strict, and seemingly unconquerable divide between the lesbians and the straight world is significant in that it emphasizes the separation that lesbians face within straight society while simultaneously depicting this straight world as uninteresting. The show works to depict an exciting and almost fantastical lesbian world. Picking up this world and putting it within a straight cocktail party proves to be a total flop. The episode simultaneously expresses to queer female viewers that they will likely not be able to fit into straight society and that they should not want to, judging from the lack of excitement at the party. This continues to reinforce the theme of representing positive queer communities through *The L Word*. While the show continually reinforces the idea that lesbians
cannot just blend into straight society, it does not depict this separation as something to be upset about, but rather something to celebrate.

**Queer and Straight Worlds: Differing Potential Points of Identification**

Both *Grey’s Anatomy* and *The L Word* provide various ways for queer viewers to identify with the characters and storylines on the show. The way that these two shows present queer life, the former as smoothly integrated with straight life and the latter as a distinct queer social world, create opposing visions of queer identity and culture. Both shows present queer sexuality in relation to straight sexuality: *Grey’s Anatomy* draws parallels to straight culture while *The L Word* emphasizes differences. Each show offers different potential ways for queer viewers to situate themselves in society.

I chose partially to focus on these shows because they illuminate two larger themes that emerge from my interviews. Many of the women I spoke with talked about how watching queer women on television helped them explore their sexuality privately and think about queerness as something that was possible in the real world. This personal level of interaction with television was important for them as they thought about what queerness looked like in the real world and how they wanted to identify their sexuality. However, television was not only a personal tool. Many women also talked about the ways in which television connected them to a larger community of queer women, making them feel less alone. They also noted television as a point of connection among queer women in real life, telling me that television facilitated their connection some larger queer community.
Chapter 2: Television as Queer Possibility

How Else Would I Know What Queer Is?

“I come from a culture where gays don't exist,” explains Amelia, as she tells me about the first moment she realized that women could be romantically involved with other women. She explained that her female biology teacher made an offhand comment mentioning her wife. For Amelia, this served as a moment of clarity: “In my head I was like, oh, that’s an option! That is not an option I thought I had.”

Amelia is a senior from a town outside of Philadelphia. She identifies her ethnicity as central Asian, and explained to me that her family’s culture does not include notions of queerness, which is why this moment with her biology teacher was so influential. She first chose to identify as queer in high school, mostly as a “personal process:” she did not originally plan on coming out or sharing her newfound sexuality with others. After this moment of realization in biology class, Amelia started thinking more and more about homosexuality, particularly from a scientific perspective: “I tried reading all about the biology behind it.” She explained that this was helpful as she tried to interpret her sexuality genetically, considering family members that might be queer. As her research allowed her to become more “comfortable” with her own sexuality and she “realized” that she was probably queer, she began to look for media representations of queer women.

For Amelia, queer media became a way to understand what being in a relationship with a woman would look like. She explains that television in particular made it easier for her to understand what queer relationships looked like.

[TV is] such an easy medium to interact with, it's immediate, it's right there. ‘Cause with books you kinda have to read, and think about it, and reflect, and there's this background
story. And in a way it's harder to imagine because it relies on your imagination, and if you don't have these images in your head already it might be a little more difficult to imagine that situation. While in TV, it's like, here you go, this is the relationship.

Coming from a culture where queerness refused to be recognized, Amelia relied on television to show her what queerness looked like. She did not point out any specific details of queer culture that she learned from television, but rather pointed to the fact that television allowed her to literally see what being a queer woman in a queer relationship meant. Possibly the most poignant moment for me was when I asked Amelia if she felt like these shows were part of her identity. “They must be part of my identity, right? Because how [else] would I know what queer is?” It was clear at this moment that Amelia had not necessarily thought about television as helping to develop her identity, because she did not explicitly try to mimic a specific queer culture that she saw on television. Instead, Amelia turned to television as a way to understand queerness in general, and to validate that queerness was indeed “a possibility.”

For the women that I talked to, television was something that opened up a new way of thinking about and understanding the world around them. Amelia’s interaction with television reaches beyond a simple desire to see people like her reflected in the media. Her comments about coming to understand queer identity point to a larger and more impactful way in which she interacted with television. Amelia’s realization that these queer characters “must” be a part of her identity indicates the significance that television plays in her life: television did not only provide her with the original idea of what it meant to be queer, but over time helped give her the ability to formulate ideas about her own sexuality and future.

In their article, “Growing Up With Television,” Gerbner et al. argue that television research should move from looking at the “effects... of selective exposure” towards a “cultivation” framework that considers the “contributions television viewing makes to viewer
conceptions of social reality” (Gerbner 2002:47). This cultivation framework allows us to look at the ways in which viewers use television as a way to inform themselves of their social context and make judgments about the world around them. Larry Gross offers a similar idea in his book *Up From Invisibility*, arguing that people use television and reality to form a “patched together” understanding of real-life situations (Gross 2001:11). These frameworks both emphasize the understanding that television does not affect people in isolated situations, but rather in varied and cumulative ways. Understanding interactions with television as a process fits in with the way my subjects spoke about their experiences. Though many women described particular moments than impacted them, no one spoke of these moments in isolation. My informants understood their television viewing experience holistically: as a part of their lives rather than a series of individual events. Amelia, and many others I spoke with, talked about a conscious decision to begin looking for and consuming television and other forms of media that featured queer women. In this way, the media they consumed allowed them to cultivate a new social world, one that included queerness.

Many of the other women I spoke with echoed Amelia’s comments. Aly explained that there was a gap she had in understanding queer female life. She described the two representations of queer women she found when she was younger: “experimenting in high school…or being 40 years old and being a parent and like, living in like Brooklyn with your partner and wearing your Birkenstocks.” She knew that these two ends of the spectrum did not define all of queer life, but she did not quite understand how to bridge the gap between them. In this way, *Grey’s Anatomy* was helpful for her, because it allowed her to see “this adult version of what being a queer woman meant, and how that could be a real, tangible, thing.” Her comments are almost identical to Amelia’s when she described what seeing queer women on television
meant to her. When I asked Aly to describe what she looks for in representations of queer female relationships, she told me she looked for something that could show her what a happy queer relationship looked like, a show that would give her “an example for a life you can have.” Television helped her to understand what queerness could look like in the real world, and to validate its existence as a possible future path.

Jordyn, a senior, knew that being queer was possible, but outside of television did not know any queer women before coming to college. Jordyn came out as bisexual the summer after her freshman year of college. Although television was a big part of her life growing up, she did not actively seek out representations of queer women during her coming out process. However, when I asked her if any moments stuck out to her watching television, she immediately mentioned the first episode that she realized the character Emily in *Pretty Little Liars* is gay. At first, she told me this excitement was because she “thought that Emily was really beautiful.” When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that the character expanded her understanding of what a queer woman looked like.

"It was exciting to see someone who I had very quickly assumed was straight was gay... I had a very singular idea of what being lesbian was. And she kind of pushed that a little bit. And that was like, oh I guess that exists, and you don't have to be masculine or androgynous to be lesbian."

For Jordyn, seeing queer women on television was not about discovering queerness in general, but about expanding her perceptions of what queer women look like. Up until this point, Jordyn had only seen more masculine-presenting queer women, so seeing Emily, who was very feminine, made her realize the different ways that queer women could present themselves.

One of the most interesting moments of my conversation with Jordyn was when she mentioned watching *The Fosters*, a family drama that focuses on an interracial lesbian couple and their children. She told me, “Seeing an interracial lesbian couple was something I never even
thought of, which is weird because my parents are interracial.” This indicates the power that these representations held for Jordyn. She continued to elaborate on this later in our discussion.

I take - and took - TV really seriously, so I feel like seeing [bisexual representation] on TV would probably be just as, if not more, influential than hearing it from a friend. Because… seeing something on TV means that multiple people checked this, and said that it was universal enough to put it on the television and have people relate to it, you know what I mean? That seems pretty important.

To Jordyn, seeing bisexual representation meant more than just visibility: it meant that some external source was validating bisexuality. Thus, seeing a feminine presenting character like Emily not only expanded Jordyn’s perceptions of what a queer woman could look like but simultaneously validated those representations.

Arjun Appadurai explains in his book *Modernity at Large* how cultural representations are transmitted in an increasingly globalized world. He describes “imagination as a social practice,” explaining it as “a form of negotiation between site of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996:31). In this chapter, Appadurai explains that people use media to construct images of a life different than one’s own. He refers to the concept of a “mediascape” as both “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information…and to the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai 1996:35). The combination of so many different medias allows consumers to form “scripts…of imagined lives. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives” (Appadurai 1996:35-36). Amelia’s explanation that television allowed her to visualize a “possibility” and Jordyn’s explanation that she had not previously considered a mixed race lesbian couple or feminine presenting lesbian demonstrate that their readings of the media they consumed allowed them to create a new script of what their world might look like. The idea
that television has the power to inspire “protonarratives of possible lives” is central to my discussions with Jordyn, Amelia, and many of my other informants as they described their use of television as an exploratory space. Their use of media to construct a vision of what queer life looks like reflects Appadurai’s explanation of media as a base for imagination.

Maggie, a senior who realized she was queer freshman year, also used the media as a source of information. But unlike Amelia and Jordyn, Maggie wanted more specific and practical information on what it meant to be queer and how exactly she should perform this identity. After first becoming involved with another woman, Maggie explained that she embarked on an almost frenzied search for information on Autostraddle, a lesbian pop culture website. She described a desire to better understand exactly what it meant to be gay: “It was just like...I have no idea how to do this. Someone please instruct me on who I should be and how I should do it.”

For Maggie, queerness was not something present in the media she consumed or any of her lived experiences until college. When she began a relationship with another woman, this gap in knowledge became apparent to her, and she had to rush to fill it with information from various media sources: “I immediately read every Autostraddle article that exists, and Buzzfeed, and binge-watched all of *The L Word,*” she told me. Maggie’s description of her actions exemplifies the “patched together” way that media consumers learn about the social world.

Similar to Amelia, Maggie points to her lack of exposure to queer relationships as the motivation to engage with queer media. But Maggie was not necessarily confused by the idea of queerness in general; rather, she was confused by the practicalities, especially related to queer relationships. Instead of pointing out a specific model missing from her own life, Maggie eloquently pointed out the ways in which society as a whole almost exclusively teaches people about heterosexual relationships. Heterosexuality is the most visible relationship structure, and it
is what children grow up seeing all around them, both in their lived experiences and in the media. Queerness is not learned in the same way. Unlike many other groups of minorities, gay and lesbian people do not usually grow up with other queer people around them (Gross 2001:13). Instead, queer young adults must supplement this lack of information and find other ways to understand what their romantic relationships might look like. Maggie’s stories about searching for information and a desire for someone to teach her about queer relationships demonstrated her lack of information on queer relationships. Even though she admitted that her frantic search through Autostraddle seemed a bit “childish and naive, retrospectively,” she knew this was the only way to find the information she needed: “Who else [was] I gonna ask?”

Craig Calhoun writes on the social construction of identity in the chapter “The Politics of Identity and Recognition” in Critical Social Theory. In this chapter, Calhoun argues that the representation of an identity is a key aspect of how someone understands their identity, both in the ways people choose to identify themselves and in the ways these identities are recognized (or not) by others. “We face the problems of recognition because socially sustained discourses about who it is possible or appropriate or valuable to be inevitably shape the way we look at and constitute ourselves” (Calhoun 1995:213). In their own ways, Amelia, Jordyn, and Maggie all pointed to the ways in which social discourse around queer women’s sexuality impacted the ways they viewed their own identity. For Amelia, simply seeing a representation of queerness on television opened up the possibility of queer sexuality. For Jordyn, the various images of queer women and queer female relationships she watched changed her opinions on what queer female identity looked like. And for Maggie, learning about queer sexual and romantic relationships through television and other popular online media sources filled in the gaps in knowledge and settled her doubts about how she should enact her queerness.
Beyond Possibilities: Emotional reactions to queer television

Beyond just having an individual connection with television, the women I spoke with described an emotionally intense relationship with television. Kyla is a film and media studies major, and spends a lot of time thinking about and dissecting her relationship with television. She even hopes to write for television one day. But when I asked Kyla how she feels when she sees a queer woman on television, she was at a loss for words.

So much! I feel so much! [laughs] Um... I don't- I have thought about this a lot and I don't really know how to adequately verbalize it, because I go into this mode of just like, high pitched screaming in my head. Just like, ah! [Mimics scream.] It's so great!

Simply talking to me about queer representation caused Kyla to become overwhelmed with emotion: after a few words she realized that she had forgotten my original question. When I asked her to try to describe what she feels when watching queer women on television, she did not have the words to describe this experience. This was especially extraordinary after hearing Kyla talk so eloquently about her academic work in film studies. She spends most of her academic time learning to discuss and dissect media, but she still lacks the vocabulary to describe the personal significance that seeing a queer woman on television holds for her.

Kyla continued to describe to me how queer female characters affect her television viewing experience. Since she spends so much time analyzing television, she explained that often spends time thinking about what’s going to happen in a show, and where the plot is headed. This all changes when she watches shows with queer women. Queer female characters, she said, cause her to be “emotionally preoccupied” as she watches a show. “Something huge could happen and I totally won't see it coming,” she explained.

The level of emotional investment indicates a deeply personal level of engagement with the show. For these women, seeing themselves represented onscreen is not just an isolated
incident of excitement; rather, it indicates an emotional significance that transforms her viewing experience. Kyla’s inability to describe her emotions to me during our discussion communicates not only her emotional response; it also communicates to me that she understands how intense and unique these emotions are. That is, through her lack of articulation, Kyla communicates how strongly she feels in the actual moment of watching queer women on television.

One possible reason for Kyla’s inability to articulate her emotions is how infrequently queer female characters come up on television. Some of the women I spoke with told me they were “surprised” when they saw a queer female character that they did not know about before watching the show; they do not casually watch television expecting to see queer characters. In his book *Television and Everyday Life*, Roger Silverstone argues that television has become an almost invisible part of daily life, and has become a method around which society operates. He explains, “We take television for granted in a way similar to how we take everyday life for granted” (Silverstone 1994:3). While the women that I spoke with did not necessarily describe television itself as a special object, they certainly did not take queer female characters on television for granted. Their emotional excitement, surprise, and understanding that queer women are not common on television indicate a different relationship with television. These women do not get the privilege of taking queerness on television for granted; they are keenly aware of their representation and the importance that it holds for them.

Another possible reason that Kyla could not articulate her feelings is a simple lack of vocabulary to talk about her own representation. Although she studies film and television, she lacks this vocabulary to talk about her own representation. Her academic understanding of film was apparent throughout our conversation as she described similarities in scenes in different shows and described the ways in which these shows used queer characters. However, this
vocabulary fails her as she tries to describe her own feelings watching queer women on television: the vocabulary she uses in an academic sense does not adequately convey the strength of her personal reactions.

"And I never told her about it again": television as private space

The women I spoke with overwhelmingly chose to interact with television on an individual level. Though almost every woman expressed a desire to talk about queer media with other queer women, they still preferred to first digest this media alone. “When I’m watching it, I like to be alone with it... I feel like my reaction might be different if I'm with other [people]” Amelia explained. When I first asked her about her television watching habits, this desire to watch alone did not come up. In fact, this habit came up only after we discussed the ways in which she uses various forms of queer media to connect with other queer women.

As we sat in a rather hot and small room in the library, Amelia reflected upon her connection to other queer people throughout her time at Swarthmore. She explained that she found it hard, and often uncomfortable to connect with other queer women based only on their shared sexuality: “you can feel artificial, like, we're just here because we're queer.” Amelia explained that basing friendships on sexuality felt awkward because these friendships often lacked another common interest. For Amelia, queer media like film, television, or books, provides a more authentic way to forge friendships with other queer women because it offers a point of connection other than sexuality. Amelia likes discussing the queer characters she sees on television with other queer women because she enjoys talking to people who have a similar level of excitement about the show. “Whenever I am interacting with another queer woman I'm more
likely to bring that [media featuring queer women] up, because there's a greater chance that we're going to have the same reaction.”

I asked Amelia if this eagerness to share her excitement meant that she liked to watch television with other queer people. She quickly responded: “Hm... well... I might need to add this. I don't like watching TV with people.” It was only then that she explained her desire to interact with this media on a solitary level. While she enjoys sharing and recommending shows, she does not enjoy actually watching these shows with others. She explains that watching television with other people causes her to feel uncomfortable: “I'm more likely to censor my emotions, I don't know... I'm just not interacting with it the way I would at home.” Throughout her answer, it was clear that even though Amelia did not want to experience this media communally, she enjoyed sharing her feelings about it with other queer women.

This was a common experience among the women I spoke with. Some, like Amelia, preferred to watch alone because it allowed them to be more honest with their reactions. Kyla told me about a time after the Legend of Korra finale when she cried “happy tears” alone in her room. The desire to watch television alone demonstrates a level of intimacy these women have when engaging with television. Watching shows that feature queer women is not just about looking for representation, but about exploring their sexuality in some way. As Amelia indicated earlier in our conversation, she used queer media as a tool to understand sexuality, and she considers these queer characters part of her identity. This personal connection makes television viewing a more intimate experience than it would be otherwise.

For Amelia, interacting with queer media alone created a space in which she could digest her reactions herself. Television acted as a tool, providing her with the capacity to imagine what a queer sexuality might look like, and how this possibility fit into her social world. The ability to
take in these images of sexuality alone and work through them privately was important as Amelia considered her new, potentially altered view of the social world as it related to her own sexuality.

Unfortunately, this private time to reflect was not always just a preference, but instead something dictated by the reactions of others. Some women felt some discomfort, and even shame, in watching a queer relationship on television. Besides being able to separate her academic and emotional reactions, Kyla also told me that her parents’ negative response to queer characters caused her to want to watch queer television alone. “My dad leaves the room and my mom gets mad. It’s bad,” Kyla explained of watching shows as a family that feature queer characters. Her parents associated queer romance or sexuality with pornography: “My mom has responded very badly in the past to that, where she’s like, ‘What are you watching? Why are you watching this? This is pornographic!'”

Madison, a senior who identifies as a lesbian, had similar feelings. She explained to me that she does not share her experiences watching television with many people besides her girlfriend, because watching lesbians on television is “kind of tinged with shame.” Similar to Kyla, she describes reactions from others that assume a connection between queer characters and pornography. Madison described one particularly painful memory in which she told a friend about a movie she watched:

"There was this friend, and we both really liked rom-coms. And so I watched a queer rom-com, and I tried to tell her about it once… And she was like, ‘you were watching a lesbian movie?!’ And of course that makes it sound like porn. And she said it so loud. It was in front of our entire cross-country team, and it was so embarrassing. I'll never forget that moment. And I was just like, ‘forget it.’ And I never told her about it again, and I never told anyone that I was watching these lesbian movies again, because it made me ashamed of it."
Throughout my discussion with Madison, it was clear that this sense of shame was incredibly difficult for her. Looking back on this situation with her friend, she was upset and angry that she felt ashamed about “wanting to feel represented.” She now understands that these feelings were valid: “I know what I want, and I know what I need, and beyond that, I know what I deserve.” At various points during our conversation, Madison referenced this need for representation, telling me that she was now making an active effort “to consume queer things and queer media and... be proud of [her]self.”

Although watching this movie had made Madison happy, her peers’ reaction immediately taught her that this type of engagement with queer media was unacceptable. Thus, although the film had provided Madison with a positive queer representation, she learned that she could not share these feelings with others. Madison joked about watching television “in the dead of night at two bars of volume.” Although she was light-hearted as she explained her habits, it was clear that the sentiment she conveyed was serious. Even though she no longer felt the need to watch queer television shows secretly, she refrained from talking about them with a lot of people. This sense of shame that weighed so heavily on her caused her keep her television preferences private.

Television, in conveying an image of the social world, tells the audience what is good and bad (Capsuto 2000:1). But the social context around the viewer also contributes to this understanding. The disconnect between Madison’s genuine excitement about a queer rom-com and her friend’s negative reaction did not cause her to stop watching queer television, but it did affect the way she interacted with the television. For Madison, television opened up new possibilities, but they were possibilities that were decidedly not available in her social world at the time. Thus, even though queer media gave Madison pleasure in some ways, these positive representations could not change the ways that people around her reacted to queerness.
As referenced in chapter one, Ang’s work about the viewers of *Dallas* describes the ways in which women identify with the show. She points out that the ability to understand the show as a possible fantasy is an important aspect of a viewer’s identification with it. Ang argues that “fantasy and fiction can play a distinctive role” in allowing viewers to experiment with different identities while they watch television (Ang 1997:164). She explains: “They offer a private and unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted” (Ang 1997:164). Although Ang writes about women forming various feminine identities, my informants demonstrated a similar strategy in their use of queer television. Their desire to watch queer television alone because of homophobic comments from friends or family reflects this need to privately consider different possible identifications. By watching television alone, my informants were able to think about the possibility of identifying as queer “without consequences” (Ang 1997:164).

Television can provide an exploratory space that allows viewers to think about their own identities in relation to their social world. For the women that I interviewed, television offered a space in which they could consider their sexuality privately, and on their own terms. The images of queer women on television allowed them to envision queerness as a possibility, whether or not this was a possibility that existed in their own lives at the time. This space to explore was important for these women as they considered their own sexuality. Having these personal relationships with queer characters and being able to process them on an individual level was important as they formed their own ideas about their sexuality, without external criticism.
Television as a personal exploratory space

Amelia, Jordyn, Kyla, Maggie, and Madison all emphasized the ways television offered them a private space to explore and expand their understanding of their sexuality: by providing representation, opening up new possibilities, and filling in gaps in knowledge. Yet the problem of how their identities fit into a broader social context was a persistent theme in our discussions, exemplified by their disinclination to watch queer media with friends or family. Their emphasis on television as a private space demonstrates some of the unique challenges that queer people face, as they are often isolated from other queer people. In his book, Gross states: “the media are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of events and groups about which we have little firsthand opportunity for learning” (Gross 2001:11). My informants’ use of media to understand more about queer sexuality illustrates this point. These women relied on television and other queer media sources to understand what identifying as queer might look like in the real world and to help construct a vision for a personal queer sexuality.
Chapter 3: Imagining a Queer Community Through Television

All of the women I spoke with expressed that their personal connection with queer television shows and characters was intertwined with an understanding of a larger queer community. While they each told stories of private moments in which they were personally changed or affected by a television show, they also frequently referenced the representation of queer women on television as a larger social issue. For many of the women I spoke with, not only was television a tool used to grapple with their identity on a personal level, but also served as an important connection to the larger queer community.

“I never feel totally isolated when I’m watching TV”

Many of the women I spoke with had a keen awareness of the ways in which the media they consume affects others. Some women spoke of a desire to help younger queer women who were less comfortable with their sexuality. These women recognized that their experiences with television, though personal, were not unique, and they expressed a desire to continue to make television representations better so that younger queer women would have an easier coming out process than they did. Kyla wants to write for television because “positive media representation” is “the most important part of it being in the [queer] community” for her. “You need to have queer kids who believe in themselves. You can't have people just think that they don't matter because of who they love,” she explained.

Kyla’s drive to write positive representations of queer women points to an understanding of how important this television was for her; it also points to an understanding of a larger queer community. Although Kyla watches television alone and prefers to process television by herself,
she knows that her experience is not unique. Despite her personal relationship with these queer characters, Kyla still feels as though they are important on a larger scale: “I consider those shows part of the community of queer women.” She told me that she generally continues to watch shows that feature queer female characters even if she does not like the show, because she feels an obligation to “at least give these shows a shot and to keep them on the air.” Kyla believes that supporting these shows is an important part of supporting other queer women who might like the show: “It might not be my thing, but it could be the most important thing in the world to someone else. And if I can support that, and through these characters support another queer person, who is real, then that’s important to me.”

Not only does Kyla feel a certain responsibility to help other queer people, but she literally feels this connection to them when she watches television. I pointed out that it was interesting that she felt like television was such an important point of connection for the queer community, since she told me that she likes to watch television alone. I used the word “isolation” to describe what she had previously told me about her television watching habits. She interrupted me:

But I never feel totally isolated when I’m watching TV. Like, I used to have a Tumblr, and that was a big thing for me, because the other blogs that I followed were oriented around queer media. And [they were] other people who were screaming in their bedrooms alone about Carmilla [a queer web series].

It was clear through her description, and her objection to my use of the word “isolated,” that watching television was for Kyla a communal experience on many levels. Although she was not directly interacting with people as she watched, she felt “safe” knowing that there was a “little bubble of people watching [television] and enjoying” it together.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses the ways in which the concept of nationality is constructed through the imagination of people in a community. Anderson explains
that “members of even the smallest nation will never know of most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006:6). It is this imagination of a far-reaching community of people that creates an idea some sort of shared nationality and community among people who do not and will never personally know each other.

Kyla so earnestly speaking about a desire to help other queer children demonstrates how television has allowed her to imagine a community of queer people that stretches far beyond her friends and acquaintances. Her comment about fictional queer characters helping “another queer person who is real” make clear that she directly connects herself with another queer person through a fictional queer character. Despite Kyla’s opinion that the act of watching television is a private experience, the ease with which she connects to other queer people through fictional queer characters points to the power of television to be a kind of meeting point in the imagined queer community.

That Kyla found so much comfort, and even safety, in knowing other people were watching with her speaks to the power that television holds in her life. For Kyla, knowing that other people were watching the same show and having similar reactions gave her a sense of community, even though she did not know or interact with these people. This process fits exactly with Anderson’s description of how people perceive their relationship with their community as “deep, horizontal comradeship.” Kyla’s discussion of connecting with queer people as they experience queer television together, and particularly her desire to connect with queer children, points to a feeling that that they are ‘in it together’ as they navigate queer life in a heterosexual society.
Samantha, the only freshman I spoke with, was somewhat reserved as she answered my questions. She was clearly interested in exploring queer media and its connection to the queer community. She named many television shows with queer characters and told me about two classes she took that semester, her first in college, that discussed gender, sexuality, and media. Unlike the older women I spoke with, however, she had not thought extensively about these academic subjects in relation to her own experiences as a queer woman.

While Kyla found meaningful connection with an imagined community of queer women, Samantha found it comforting to actually interact with others with similar feelings. She discussed queer fandoms: online communities where people can interact and bond over a shared interest. At first, she mentioned this in an academic sense; she had just talked about fandoms in one of her classes. She explained to me, “people who are queer can come together in spaces like fandoms and talk about how they’re being represented on TV… and how they’re feeling in relation to their representation.” I asked her if she had experienced any of this connection personally. She laughed. “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I was on Tumblr and I was a big part of the Glee fandom.” She described this fandom: “It was a really cool and safe space for me to be able to be with other people who felt how I felt, and able to talk and form a community.”

For Samantha, belonging to this online fandom enhanced the experience of watching television. She enjoyed being connected with other people who shared her interest. I asked how this affected her experience being queer and how it might have impacted the way she thought about her own queer identity.

I still didn’t identify as anything other than straight until recently, but it was definitely good for me to have this, ’cause like, it was like a different world than what I was actually in… it was important to have that experience, and it probably helped me, forming my identity.
Until she told me this, I had not realized that her involvement in the fandom occurred before she came out as bisexual. Her lack of elaboration on the issue made it seem like she did not yet understand all the ways in which the fandom impacted her choice to identify as queer. However, it was clear that being a part of this community played some role in her life as a queer person. For Samantha, the fact that fandom allowed her to be a part of a “different world” was an important step in her process of coming to identify as bisexual. At that point, she was not yet sure of her sexuality, and this online community gave her the chance to bond with other people that cared about the same characters without putting pressure on her to define her sexuality.

Kyla and Samantha both found television to be a connection to other queer people that they did not know personally. Television allowed them to feel that there were others like them, experiencing similar situations, even though they were not close physically. Gross explains that queer people generally do not grow up embedded in a queer community (Gross 2001:13). Kyla and Samantha’s experiences demonstrate that a community built around television was an important tool in surmounting this physical isolation.

**Television and the social construction of queer community**

In his book *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault details the social construction of sexuality as part of a person’s essential identity. Foucault argues that intense discourse and regulation of sexual behaviors led to a focus on mapping these behaviors to particular bodies. This “specification of individuals” is not just a classification of behaviors, but also the construction of a specific category of the “homosexual” (Foucault 1990:43). This specification targets the very essence of a person, claiming that the cause of these particular sexual actions is at their very core: homosexuality “was everywhere present in him…it was consubstantial with
him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature” (Foucault 1990:43). The idea that homosexuality can be tied to a person’s essence informs the way that my informants understand their own sexuality and connection with a queer community.

This framework for understanding sexuality was probably most evident in my discussions with Samantha. “I only fully came out to myself last year,” she told me. She explained that this process of deciding to identify as bisexual “took a long time.” Though she watched shows like Glee and Pretty Little Liars that featured queer characters before she came out, she did not necessarily watch these shows for the purpose of queer representation. She “eventually” realized that she was “drawn to” the queer characters in the shows she watched because of her own sexual preferences. Samantha kept emphasizing that she liked watching these characters so much because they were “relatable,” though it was hard for her to articulate exactly why. She described her queer sexuality as “always there,” even though she did not come to identify as bisexual for until recently. She explained: “I feel like the reason why I related to these characters so much in the 8th and 9th grade was because... I just wouldn't admit it to myself.”

The ways Samantha discussed her understanding of her own sexuality echo Foucault’s description of sexuality and sexual identity. Foucault explains that the modern phenomenon of codifying sexual preferences provides a way for a particular sexual identity to be “extracted from people’s bodies” (Foucault 1990:48). By saying that her sexuality was “always there,” Samantha implies that her sexual preferences form a deep, essential identity that she slowly discovered throughout her life, something that is part of her identity rather than a set of desires. My discussions with my informants make clear the tangible effects of a societal understanding of an essential sexual identity. That is, although the idea of an innate sexual identity is socially and
historically constructed, it still affects the way that people understand and talk about their sexuality.

Aly is a sophomore from Brooklyn who identifies as queer. She was eager to talk with me about television; she spoke quickly and had a lot to say. It was clear that she had thought both personally and academically about the connection between her sexuality and media consumption. Most of the times she answered my questions, she would follow up with her own analysis, thinking critically about what her words meant, especially in relation to the larger queer community. At one point, I asked Aly about the portrayal of queer female relationships on television. After talking about the dynamics between more masculine and feminine presenting lesbian characters, Aly mentioned that usually, the actresses in these roles are straight. “That’s something we kind of have to grapple with... I’m consuming this media and this media is representing me but these people aren’t out in the world representing me either,” she pointed out. Her analysis made clear that understanding television as a part of the queer community was important to her.

Aly explained to me that watching queer television was something she felt the need to do once she started dating women and making queer friends. Towards the end of her freshman year, she began dating a woman who had exclusively dated women. “It felt more like she was in the queer community than I was,” she told me. This made her feel like she had to do something to get involved in the community. For Aly, watching television, particularly *The L Word*, was an important part of this process. From what she understood, watching *The L Word* was “part of being inside this [queer female] culture.” She watched almost the entire show the summer after her freshman year.
I asked Aly if this worked: had watching *The L Word* made her feel more connected to the queer community? In some ways, yes. She now understood many of the cultural references that her queer friends made. The process also served as a way to “reaffirm” her personal identity and frame her membership in the queer community. She described her experience watching the show as making her feel like it was possible to integrate into the community: “I can have these relationships…I can live in this world.”

However, watching *The L Word* also helped her to realize that the show itself was not that important to her membership in the queer community. “I don’t think watching it actually changed anything for me,” she explained. Aly felt “a lot better” when she found out that one of her older queer friends that she looked up to had not watched the whole show. While understanding some cultural references was valuable, watching the show made her realize that *The L Word* was not necessarily a “defining” aspect of queer female culture.

What is important about this experience is that Aly found television to be a unifying aspect of the queer community and that it was a tool that gave her the power to be a part of something bigger than herself. At the same time, however, she decided that television, and *The L Word* in particular, was not a key aspect of her personal queer identity. This contrasting idea of what it means to belong to a queer community in some ways follows her trajectory of her understanding of queerness in general. While she at first felt the need to perform specific actions in order to fit into the queer community, once she performed those actions, she began to see the ways in which queer identity was socially constructed and not necessarily dependent on the television that she watched.

In her work “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” Judith Butler argues: “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of
oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (Butler 1991:308). While claiming an identity and using it as a point of self-definition can be empowering, it also, as Butler points out, necessarily creates a regulatory force by which we must determine who does and does not fit into certain identities. Butler’s work focuses on the performativity of identities – the fact that in order to enact identities one must constantly perform them through outward actions. She explains that her own existence as a lesbian is “insistently reconstituted” through “the repeated play of this sexuality” (Butler 1991:311). Her identity must be constantly reaffirmed through its own enactment; at the same time, the identity itself is constructed by these acts of adherence to regulatory norms. Thus, this identity has to be constantly re-affirmed and its performance regulated. Butler warns that creating an identity can quickly turn into a “policy” that will “require some set of differentiations and exclusions” (Butler 1991:311). Thus, while identity can serve some political aims and create a community around which to coalesce, it also necessarily makes decisions and regulations about the community that exclude.

Aly’s discussion of The L Word mirrors Butler’s writing about her existence as a lesbian. Even though Aly had already expressed romantic and sexual feelings for another woman, she felt like there were other things she had to do in order to be a part of the queer community. Once she watched the show, however, she realized that these actions were indeed performative and did not inherently enhance her connection to the queer community. This does not mean that Aly stopped watching queer television entirely. Rather, as she continued to watch The L Word she began to understand that she did not “need” to be watching it in order to belong, but that she wanted to because it made her “feel affirmed.” Seeing a show with almost all queer female characters reassured Aly that being queer “is an actual thing you can do,” not just something that people
experiment with in college. For Aly, seeing queer women onscreen was the important part of watching *The L Word*, not its status as a popular lesbian show. Now, Aly now searches for queer writers, artists, and comedians in order to continue to feel this sense of affirmation in her queer identity. For her, supporting work that is produced by and for queer people is an important part of choosing to identify as queer.

Maggie had a very similar experience watching *The L Word*. She watched the show right after she came out, when she “was in desperate need of some kind of resource that was affirming of [her] identity.” She immediately was drawn into the lesbian culture on the show. “I was like, I want this so bad...looking at women hang out, talking, laughing, loving [referencing the theme song]...I want all of these things so desperately,” she told me. The idea that Maggie was queer but not experiencing some important aspect of queer community was stressful for her, and she wanted to take part in whatever she was missing out on. Maggie explained to me that she thinks *The L Word* has “created and constructed and informed queer identity and queer spaces.” For her, this plays out in the ways she thinks about different types of lesbian identity and where she fits into these “rigid categories” that the show presents.

However influential Maggie found *The L Word* to be, she still ended up coming to a similar conclusion as Aly: “I don't think it's until much later that people get to the point where they're like, these categories aren't real, I can be whatever kind of person I want to be and still be a lesbian.” This realization that queer culture is perhaps less exclusive and narrow than previously imagined was important for Maggie as she constructed an idea of a queer community for herself. Maggie identifies as bisexual, so coming to terms with the fact that she could still be “affirmed” in her identity without having to fit “into any of these narrow, rigid categories” was an important part of accepting her queer identity.
Both Aly and Maggie’s comments about feeling a need to connect with the queer community in a particular way demonstrate how queer identity and community is socially constructed. Although she was dating a woman and felt comfortable in her sexuality, Aly still felt like she was less a part of the queer community than her partner, because she was not familiar with many of the cultural references. Similarly, Maggie felt this desire to be like the women on *The L Word*, and to have this community of queer women that was culturally homogenous in some way.

It is natural that some sort of group unity might develop as a result of ‘othering’ a particular set of characteristics and therefore creating some sort of marginalized population. Foucault explains that the constant discourse about categorizing and studying sex “made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged” (Foucault 1990:101). This pushback, and in a sense reclamation of the categories forced upon people creates a community around which people can gather. Choosing to identify as gay or lesbian can serve as a reclaimed tool of personal understanding, something that “connotes the acceptance of an essential self” (Ponse 1978:246). Using this sexuality label to identify with a group can be “experienced as finding one’s own, finally having a framework for understanding themselves and placing themselves in the world” (Ponse 1978:258). Both Maggie and Aly felt this desire to connect to a community quickly after they chose to identify as queer, and both described their experiences connecting to the community as “affirming.” The sense of feeling affirmed in their identities echoes Ponse’s comment that choosing to identify oneself with a particular sexuality can help develop a framework for understanding oneself. For Aly and Maggie, connecting to a larger
queer community and seeing other queer characters on screen allowed them to feel more positively about a larger queer community and their own queer sexuality.

It is interesting that after taking part in acts (like watching *The L Word*) that at first seemed so important to queer community, the idea of one homogenous queer culture seemed to somewhat fall apart for Aly and Maggie. Although they both still expressed a strong desire to be connected with queer media in other ways, they felt less pressure to fit into the queer community in one particular way. Instead, learning about this one aspect of queer culture made them aware of the intricacies of queer culture and diversity of queer perspectives, somewhat challenging the notion of queerness as defined by one specific type of content while simultaneously expanding this imagined community to be more inclusive.

**Distrust of Media Representation**

Almost universally, the women I spoke with expressed a frustration with the representation of queer women on television. As we discussed what they did and did not like to watch, many of these women talked about how they got nervous when watching queer characters because they were unsure of how the show would represent their identity. “It is fun and it is exciting when there is a queer character,” explained Aly, “but... I feel hesitant to trust it, I feel hesitant...[that] this is gonna represent me perfectly.” This was a fairly common sentiment among the women I spoke with. Madison described a feeling of shock when she saw a queer character appear onscreen that she was not expecting.

Well, my gut reaction is like, oh my gosh, I'm gonna tell Megan [Madison’s girlfriend]... I'll pause it just to make sure it's really happening and I'll immediately go to the Wikipedia - if I'm not expecting it - I'll go to the Wikipedia page to know what I'm expecting. I don't like to get my hopes up. So I'll read through it and then I'll watch it again.
Madison described to me her process of “intensive research” into the queer character’s storyline. She told me that usually, immediately after seeing a queer female character she was surprised by, she would open “a bunch of tabs” on her internet browser, “all of that one [queer] couple trying to figure out what’s next.” All of this research is so that she is not “disappointed” by the storyline. She does not want to get invested in the character until she knows all of the facts.

Her habit of conducting research on a queer character as soon as she sees one reflects a kind of shock that a queer character is even being shown on television. In *Up From Invisibility*, Gross tells the story of an Asian actor who remembers being called into the family room whenever an Asian character came on screen. The actor commented that his family had a “bizarre fascination” (Gross 2001:13) with these representations since they were so rare: It was a shock for his family to see an Asian character, so every time it happened, someone would alert the entire family. Madison’s desire to immediately call her girlfriend and research the new queer character shows a similar “bizarre fascination” with queer female representation. In some ways, it is almost too good to be true, and in other ways, Madison feels nervous about the potential negative impacts of the character’s portrayal. If she has not previously researched the character, seeing queer woman on television is fairly shocking and out of the ordinary. She does not expect to see herself on reflected on mainstream television. She knows, on a personal level, how these characters can misrepresent her. Her hesitation is a reminder of the marginalized position she holds in society: queer representation comes so infrequently and is so often produced from a heterosexual point of view that Madison cannot totally trust it.

Amelia has a similar hesitation but comes from a different perspective. When she sees queer characters on television, she is “surprised,” and questions how and why a queer woman
made it into the show “considering how male dominated everything is.” She expressed a distrust that the character was really there for her pleasure rather than just for “marketing purposes.” This is apparent, she explains, when the characters have no real chemistry or the character does not have any important role in the plot other than being queer. Amelia’s distrust is rooted in the idea that these characters are not being produced for her consumption. She knows that the people producing these shows are not necessarily focused on her as a minority consumer, but instead the majority groups viewing these representations.

This hesitation to trust media representations is consistent with the ideas that Gross presents in *Up From Invisibility*. Maggie, Madison, and Amelia know from their lived experiences that representations of queer women on television are not particularly common, and that “most mediated images reflect the experiences and interests of the majority groups in our society” (Gross 2001:11). Despite their sometimes-emotional reactions to seeing a queer character on television, they all have a deep understanding of what it means to live as a queer person and feel marginalized, which creates this feeling of hesitation as they consider what the representation might hold. As I continued to interview these women, exactly why they felt this hesitation became clearer. Over and over again, I heard the same stories of common tropes that deeply hurt or offended these women.

**Over-sexualizing Queer Female Relationships**

When I asked what types of queer characters she liked to watch, Maggie explained that she looks for “realistic” characters that are not just a plot device: “it makes me really frustrated when there are just queer women on TV and they’re solely placed there either to cater to the male gaze or to fulfill the lesbian death trope.”
Almost every single woman I talked to brought up two things in particular: overly sexualizing and unnecessarily killing lesbian characters. Maggie felt that shows that are “intentionally sexualizing [queer women] or misleading aspects of queer identity” are “ridiculous” and “not a realistic view of queer identity.” When I asked for a specific example of this, she mentioned the movie *Jennifer’s Body*, when the main female character seductively makes out with her best female friend. Rather than actually being a queer plotline, Maggie explains this scene as having “no queer purpose” and “exclusively catering to the male gaze” because it uses the sexual connection between these two women only to cater to male sexual fantasies.

Aly explained to me that a lot of the understanding of queer female sexuality she gathered from television and movies was framed as young, drunken, experimentation: “A lot of the stuff I understood about it was this college thing, like you experiment in college.” She also explained that in these depictions, the queer experimentation was usually framed as “crazy” and “for [the pleasure of] other people.” This affected her ideas about exploring her own sexuality: “If I did want to experiment it had to be for other people and it didn't have to be for myself.”

This feeling was repeated in many of my interviews. Jordyn described exactly the same type of representation: “there's a lot of straight girls experimenting for the male gaze.” Madison, too, found this to be a problematic theme when I asked about queer storylines that stood out to her: “I think about when it’s...some straight, upper-class white girl making out with her other basically white Barbie clone in order to get a guy's attention.”

That so many of the women I spoke with identified this as a common problem communicates both that these women feel that the television programs representing them are not made for their consumption and that their sexuality is something to be put on display for
someone else’s pleasure. Beyond just communicating that sexuality is not for a woman’s own pleasure, having to constantly see this type of objectification is frustrating and disheartening. Aly told me about one moment in particular: “the only thing I wanted to do was watch a really feel good movie or watch a *Gilmore Girls* type show that had a lesbian couple in it, and I couldn't for the life of me find one that wasn't super sexual.” This was frustrating, because she felt like what she was looking for should not be that hard to find. “It's hard to reconcile that the relationship you want and the storybook rom-com thing that everyone else gets to have sometimes isn't gonna be there.” She was clearly frustrated by this experience, and added that she thought other minorities probably faced the same problems. But Aly’s experience looking for a “feel good” show on Netflix illustrates that even when there are queer representations, they are not made for queer women themselves and are often disempowering an offensive.

**Lesbian Death Trope**

Another upsetting theme that many of my informants mentioned was the ‘lesbian death trope.’ In the lesbian fan community, this phenomenon is also commonly known as the ‘bury your gays’ trope. It refers to the high frequency with which queer women are killed on television shows. Although characters of all sexualities die on television, queer characters, and particularly queer women, face a disproportionate number of deaths onscreen. According to Autostraddle, 35% of shows that feature lesbian/bisexual characters end up killing them off. And only 16% of shows that feature lesbian/bisexual characters have happy endings for those characters (Hogan 2016, “Infographic”).

More than half of the women I spoke with brought up the lesbian death trope. “It sucks, it just like physically hurts,” Maggie explained to me. As she spoke about her experience when
Lexa, a popular character on the show *The 100* was killed, it was clear that this experience was an emotional one. She did not only hurt on a personal level: she found a community of queer women hurting alongside her on Tumblr. “I was following a million blogs of queer women who were all feeling the same way... being like, okay guys, we can get thorough this.”

It was not just Maggie that noticed the communal effects of Lexa’s death. It resulted in a huge fan reaction on all over the internet, sparking fundraising efforts to benefit LGBT community. Three weeks after the episode aired on March 3, 2016, online fan communities had raised over $65,000 dollars for The Trevor Project, an organization that supports LGBTQ youth (Hogan 2016, “Pop Culture Fix”). The news about the bury your gays trope went mainstream. National Public Radio even aired a piece about it, hosting culture critic Caroline Framke to discuss the lesbian death trope on television. Framke found that ten percent of the deaths in that television season were queer women, which “proportionally, is kind of nuts...because not many shows have [queer] women” (Martin 2016).

The idea of violence against queer people is, unfortunately, not new. This is true on television as well. In early representations of queer men on television, a common lesson was “that violence was an appropriate response to affection between men” (Capsuto 2000:37). These sexual acts were often not even about gay affection, but instead were representations in which “male characters would kiss other males to degrade or humiliate them” (Capsuto 2000:38). The lesbian death trope that my informants mention is not blatantly homophobic in the same way that these violent acts were, as they communicated that “queer-bashing was good, clean fun” (Capsuto 2000:38). However, they follow the same general story: the consequence of queer sexuality is violence.
It seems almost ridiculous to discuss why this trope is harmful. But it was heartbreaking to hear so many women discuss how painful these deaths were for them to watch. Both Madison and Kyla immediately mentioned lesbian death when I asked about a memorable moment of queer television. Kyla told me, “The two worst scenes to me are when Lexa dies and when Tara on Buffy [the Vampire Slayer] was killed.” Madison mentioned one of the same moments: a “super memorable [scene] is Tara’s death in Buffy. It’s just very awful. It’s just the bury your gays trope over again.” Both women also mentioned that these deaths occurred immediately following, even interrupting, happy moments between the character and her partner. This is a common theme; Framke describes it as “familiar” on NPR. “They had this moment of happiness. And then she walked outside and got hit by a stray bullet – completely nonsensical – and was immediately punished for it.” This familiar way of killing off queer female characters – by setting up a moment of happiness only to punish it with death – could not be more obvious in its implications. Kyla pointed this out most succinctly in our conversation: “it not only tells a wider audience that gay people are bad and that they should all end up dead, it tells queer kids that.”

It is both telling and upsetting that Kyla and Madison – both of whom at other points in the interview expressed joy at watching queer female characters – found these moments of lesbian death to be the most memorable. Seeing queer women die over and over again is painful for these women. Continually showing the world queer female characters that die, particularly right after moments of pleasure, continues to reinforce the tired narrative that queer sexuality is wrong and “must be countered through…physical violence” (Gross 1991:30).
Queer-baiting

Many of my informants mentioned being frustrated and hurt by queer-baiting. For Samantha, this first came up when I asked her what traits she looked for in queer female characters. She told me, “it’s better when their relationships are explicitly shown…I hate queer-baiting.”

Queer-baiting can be defined a few different ways, but the central idea is that some queer sexuality, whether it is sexual tension, romantic chemistry, or other subtext, is included in a television show only to have the characters reassert their heterosexuality in some way later in the show. In an article about queer-baiting in *Sherlock*, Judith Fathallah describes it as “a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility” (Fathallah 2015:491). An Autostraddle article about queer-baiting explains that for women, queer-baiting often exists is the form of “actually giving the characters some physical girl-on-girl action, but making sure it never turns into anything long-term or meaningful or contradicts the characters’ previous heterosexuality” (Rose 2013). Another form of queer-baiting is emphasizing the romantic or sexual chemistry between two same-sex characters, but never letting this relationship turn into something more than platonic. An important part of queer-baiting is that allows shows to cater to queer viewers but still “reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers” (Fathallah 2015:491).

Denial of queer sexuality is historically rooted. Television in the 1950s and 1960s “never acknowledged the actual existence of homosexuals” (Capsuto 2000:48), but instead made same-sex attraction a gag. The humor came not exactly from a place of disgust of gay people, but was
instead about the absurdity of same sex attraction. On “variety hours, straight male characters mistakenly kissed each other, then reacted with disgust, humiliation, or violence” (Capsuto 2000:26). Though the queer-baiting that my informants described is not the same as these the humor in the 1950s and 1960s – and these older shows were not an attempting to attract queer viewers – the punch line is still the same: same-sex attraction is simply ridiculous.

During our conversation, Madison got very upset about queer-baiting. She went so far as to call it a form of “gaslighting,” a term that describes a form of psychological abuse used to manipulate someone’s perceptions of reality. “It's so frustrating because it's a constant battle to feel affirmed and recognized and legitimated. But it is gaslighting, it's someone marketing your identity as something trendy, and not giving you anything back for it.” Whether or not queer-baiting is a form of gaslighting, her use of the term demonstrates the severity of the trope’s impact. For Madison, being shown this queer subtext without any acknowledgment of the chemistry between two characters is disorienting and manipulative. She emphasized that this made her feel “crazy” because she knew she could identify the chemistry but it was never officially acknowledged onscreen. Madison especially felt this way if she ever tried to point out this subtext to a straight friend who did not see it. “How come the idea of queer love and queer romance is that absurd that I need this huge amount of proof?”

Madison found fan fiction to be comforting. Even though the writing can be terrible, she explained, she thinks that it is “important to supplement that [television shows], and to see chemistry that is obviously there.” Fan fiction is a “space that acknowledges [queer subtext]. Where it’s not just a joke.” Madison’s comments eloquently point out that fan fiction can be an important tool for people to create their own representation. For Madison, reading these stories
made her feel less “crazy,” giving her reassurance that other people were also seeing queer chemistry on a show.

One of the reasons queer baiting can be so harmful is that it further pushes queer sexuality out of the mainstream conversation. As I discussed in the second chapter, many of my informants talked about television opening up new possibilities for them. For many of these women, the only queer women they saw were on television. Queer-baiting and refusing to actually depict queerness onscreen shuts off these possibilities. The refusal to acknowledge queer chemistry constantly communicates that queer relationships are not a possibility in the real world.

**Imagined Queer Communities and Understanding Queer Representation**

All of the women I talked to described an awareness of the fact that they were part of a community much larger than themselves. Some found more comfort in this connection than others. Kyla and Samantha took pleasure in connecting with other queer women; Maggie and Aly felt slightly more pressured by this idea of a larger community, expressing their initial desire to fit into the community in a certain way. Each of these woman’s stories, however, is representative both of a social construction of sexuality and an ability to imagine, or create a community around this constructed sexual identity. The ease with which Kyla, Samantha, Aly, and Maggie conjured up the idea of existence of other, unknown queer people demonstrates how powerfully this idea of an essential sexuality has been created and the internal desire and social pressure that creates a drive to form different connections within the community.

However, the negative aspect of being able to imagine this queer community larger than oneself seems to be the ability to understand, on both a personal and community level, that these
representations have real effects. The women I spoke with easily conjured up moments when painful tropes affected them emotionally. The ability to identify these tropes and connect them to a framework of queer representation in general indicates these women's understanding that they are connected to a larger network of queer women that impacts the ways in which they identify their sexuality and relate to the community associated with that sexuality.
Conclusion

Some words from Chaz Bono referring to transgender representation on television have inspired and driven much of this research process: “If there was somebody like me on TV when I was growing up, my whole life would have been different.” This thought rings true for me, and as I was conducting my research, I was reminded many times that television has the power to change lives. It was meaningful to get the opportunity to listen to my informants talk about their experiences. In many ways, I could tell that television was beginning to change. But most of these women, like Bono, expressed a hope that representation would continue to improve.

This thesis has explored the various ways in which queer women use the representations of queer women on television as a tool to understand their queer sexuality. First, I examined the power of television to construct a viewer’s perceptions of the social world. An analysis of two shows in particular, Grey’s Anatomy and The L Word provides examples of the potential points of identification that television shows can offer its viewers.

The next chapter provided a more in-depth understanding of how and why queer women use television. My informants’ use of television to imagine possibilities of queer sexuality contextualizes the research on television as a producer of social reality. The women I spoke with used television as a way to understand what queer looked like and how it might feel for them to identify as queer. For many of them, seeing a queer woman on television meant that it was possible to identify as queer in the real world. Television also provided a sense of community for my informants. For some women, this was an imagined community: simply knowing that others were watching the same shows built a sense of solidarity. For others, television acted as a gateway to interacting with queer communities in the real world, providing a conversational
meeting point and structuring, sometimes with serious pressure to conform, groups of queer women.

This thesis has proven that television has the power to inform queer women's understanding of queer sexuality on both a personal and community level. For my informants, television provided a necessary space in which to explore their sexuality at their own pace. Being able to privately process these representations was important for these women as they used these images to form their own understanding of sexuality. This thesis also proves that television has the power to create a sense of community among women that do not personally know each other. Seeing representations of queer women on television helped these women to conceptualize what queer community could look like.

Television is not just mindless entertainment. For many viewers, representations on television provide a way to contextualize their own identities and imagine communities outside of their personal sphere. For queer women, television is a powerful tool that can be used to question, challenge, and validate ideas about sexuality and provide support through a connection to larger queer community.

This research is limited in its scope, as I only interviewed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer women at Swarthmore College. A severe limitation of this group is their age: they all grew up in the same culture of television and cannot provide personal accounts of the ways in which queer representation on television has changed over time. A broader study could consider women of different ages, providing a better understanding how the shifts in the televisual landscape have affected the ways with which women engage with media. Another limitation of this study was the lack of engagement with different labels of sexuality and queer identity. I used the umbrella term “queer” as I spoke with my informants. Lack of representation of bisexuality was a theme
that often came up in interviews, and it would be interesting to focus more on the ways in which different queer sexualities are represented on television.

My research makes clear that television has an important role in these women’s lives. However, I only got the chance to speak with these women at one very particular point in their lives. Understanding the ways in which television’s role changes in a person’s live over time would provide even more extensive results. Though I tried to ask questions to understand this in my own informants, they are simply not old enough to provide as much perspective. Interviewing a group of women over a longer period of time would give a much broader understanding of how television impacts their lives at different stages. Perhaps television fades in importance as time goes on. I would speculate that television becomes salient in times of transition or confusion. It has become clear thorough this research that television provides a way to imagine possibilities that are not yet reality. I suspect that this remains true throughout various stages of life, especially considering the enthusiasm with which my informants discussed the positive effects of queer female representation.

I would like to conclude with a quote from one of my informants, Aly, that stuck out because of its remarkable similarity to Bono’s words. “It's fun to find a movie or a TV show that's kind of fulfilling this romantic comedy thing that you wish you had seen in 9th grade but you didn't. Yeah, maybe it would be different if I had seen this then.”

I would like to push forward with this research on a hopeful note, with a sincere belief that queer representation is improving and making a real difference in many people’s lives. Hopefully, it will not be much longer that we continue to say, “it would have been different.”
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