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# The Rainbow Effect: Exploring the Implications of Queer Representation in Film and Television on Social Change

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**Claremont McKenna College**

**The Rainbow Effect: Exploring the Implications of Queer Representation in Film  
and Television on Social Change**

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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BY

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for

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## Introduction

When I was 16 years old I was in love with my best friend, but I never knew it until she broke my heart. I didn't understand that the emotions that I was feeling were *that* kind of love, I just knew that my heart hurt, and it didn't feel like it was ever going to stop. I remember curling up in my bed, constantly wishing for someone to talk to and a way to understand the whirlwind of emotions swirling around inside of me. For 18 years I had called Redding, California my home. It is a tiny town in the northern-most part of California, four hours from San Francisco and two hours from the Oregon border. Redding was an amazing place to grow up: it had all of the charm of a tight-knit small town and all of the picturesque scenery to go with it from the two lakes and surrounding mountains. But despite the beautiful variations in scenery and outdoors activities one can partake in Redding has a very obvious stagnancy of demographic differences. The community is predominantly comprised of white, middle class retirees, all of whom hold very passionate conservative political leanings. Even though I was raised by two incredible and accepting parents, there was no place for a sexually confused 16 year-old Indian girl to go to try to understand her sexual identity. And then, in 2009, I discovered *South of Nowhere* on iTunes, and things started to change.

*South of Nowhere* followed the lives of a Midwestern Carlin family that is transplanted in Los Angeles, where the three teenage kids, Spencer, Glen and Clay have to get adjusted to a new high school. Spencer, the youngest child, forms a friendship with bisexual rocker girl Ashley Davies and begins to question her own sexuality. Not only was

*South of Nowhere* the first show on The N to deal with the topic of sexual orientation, it was also the first space that featured another teenage girl trying to figure out the feelings she held for her best friend, just like I was. I distinctly remember watching the episode in which Spencer comes out to herself, and thinking, “*What if I’m gay?*”

A few days after watching the first season, I locked myself in the local Barnes & Noble bathroom during a tutoring session. I was in there for 30 minutes as I worked up the courage to send a text, “Mom, would you still love me if I was gay?” As soon as I sent the text I wanted to vomit, but I also felt an incredible sense of relief. My mom’s response, while supportive, was not what mattered. What mattered was that, thanks to *South of Nowhere*, I finally understood myself, and I was able to put my identity into words. For me, the importance of representation isn't just to create an entertaining identification with a narrative; it’s about creating an identification that allowed someone like me to understand and accept my identity as an Indian woman and to come to terms with my own bisexual identity. *South of Nowhere* helped me put my emotions and my feelings into words. I could finally understand why my heart hurt so much, and it wasn't because of raging adolescent hormones. The representations of teenagers just like me, facing their own emotional insecurities, confusion, and ultimate acceptance gave me the understanding and confidence to embrace the whirlwind of emotions within me and I knew that I would come out of this with strength, and would be loved. But most importantly it reassured me that “the whole gay thing that [I am] feeling is important”<sup>1</sup>, and wasn’t just

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<sup>1</sup> Jonas E. Agin, and Paige Bernhardt. "Secret Truths." *South of Nowhere*. The N. Los Angeles, CA, 4 Nov. 2005. Television.

hormones. The meaningful representations of these characters made me feel not so alone in an environment where I was all-too unique, both ethnically and sexually. I will forever be grateful for those characters for giving me the strength to understand and to accept myself.

I never really tried to put the importance of representation in my own life into words until a few days after the 2014 Academy Awards. In the wake of Jared Leto's win for Best Supporting Actor for his role as the trans woman Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club*, everyone was so excited, either applauding or criticizing him. My Facebook timeline was ablaze with a myriad of opinions about Rayon, and one night my friends and I engaged in a discussion about Rayon, *Dallas Buyers Club* and what the Oscar meant (on a larger scale). At one point in this conversation, a friend of mine stated that it doesn't matter how well Rayon was portrayed as a transgender woman, because *Dallas Buyers Club* was not about Rayon or transgender people. Her statement resonated within me, because it does matter how a marginalized group of people is portrayed on such a wide reaching medium. Representation is important. And when a flawed version of a community of people wins a prestigious award, it serves as a gateway for flawed understanding and perceptions of that community to arise and persist. Representation matters because it gives an outlet of identification and reassurance to viewers who may not have that outlet in their immediate demographic areas. It allows viewers to experience the lives of people that they may never have the chance to interact with in real life. Representation connects us all to essential human stories, and to shortchange the stories of a group of people just because "the



movie isn't about them” is to shortchange the narratives of individuals throughout the world who are seeking understanding. Representation in narrative film and television was an incredibly important part of my teenage years that were full of so much emotional confusion: the meaningful representation of teens who were just as emotionally confused as I was helped me to understand my own disorientation.

To be entertained by narrative film and television is to take part in its ability to engage us “through the exhibition of the fortunes and misfortunes of others”<sup>2</sup>. The power of film and television stems from its ability to connect viewers emotionally with the narratives and characters portrayed on screen. As viewers, the more invested we are in these narratives, the more we are entertained by them. We use film and television as a place to escape from the real world, where we can invest ourselves in the slightly more dramatic, glamorous, and exciting lives of our fictional counterparts. Jonathon Cohen describes the intense viewer-narrative relationship that is formed through film and television:

By allowing us to share in the lives of others, entertainment can excite and educate us, can make us imagine, think and feel in ways we may not otherwise have a chance to experience. We expand our emotional and mental lives beyond the scope of our personal experience and participate in community and cultural life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> D.Zillman, & Bryant, J. (2002). “Entertainment as media effect”. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 437.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Cohen. "Audience Identification With Media Characters." *Psychology of Entertainment*. Ed. Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006. 183. Print.

Film and television throw us into worlds we might never have had a chance to experience and by connecting us so deeply with the narratives of characters on screen we are brought to a place where we experience a world through a different perspective, allowing us to understand the lives and feel the emotions of characters and individuals we may never really know in real life.

This connection that is drawn between us, the viewers, and the characters on screen is an integral aspect of creating an engaging narrative that becomes meaningful and therefore entertaining for the audience. The audience's identification with these characters gives viewers "a point of view on the plot,"<sup>4</sup> which gives the audience a window to more easily understand both the narrative and the behaviors and emotions of the character. The audience identifies with a character through the traits that the character exhibits that are most like audience members. The strongest forms of audience identification stem from a character, or relationship, that both represents aspects of our own lives and aspects of lives we want to have. These characters show us what we want to become, and inspire us to chase that in our own lives, an aspect of audience identification that is especially important to the representation of "othered" (ethnic or sexual minorities) characters. For example, I identify extremely closely with *The Mindy Project's* Mindy Lahiri, who is also a young second generation Indian American woman with a pop-culture obsession and irreverent sense of humor. Mindy exhibits similar physical traits as me, while also demonstrating personality characteristics that I aspire to have myself, allowing me to be-

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 194.

come more invested in her life as I both relate to it and desire it. Many viewers form strong identification with one part of a couple in romantic comedies like *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. Movies in which viewers can relate to the eccentricities of love, the lustful desire of a seemingly unobtainable attractive partner which allow us to live vicariously through the lead character. The strongest forms of audience identification stem from a character, or relationship, that both represents aspects of our own lives and aspects of lives we want to have. These characters show us what we want to become, and inspire us to chase that in our own lives, an aspect of audience identification that is especially important to the representation of “othered” (ethnic or sexual minorities) characters.

The representations of minorities in film and television have historically been flawed. In classical Hollywood, African-Americans were stereotyped as the subservient “mammy” character, and Asians were presented as caricatures of their culture and martial arts prowesses. Most often these characters were not even played by actors with the same ethnicity, they were instead white men in “black face” or “yellow face” which only furthered the visual stereotype of various minority ethnicities. Queer characters were also among the minorities that were highly stereotyped to uphold preexisting social hierarchies. The one-dimensional stereotyping of these minorities served as a way to reinforce the white heterosexual dominant society. Preventing these minorities from challenging the social power of white heterosexual men and destroying the well-established patriarchal hierarchy with perceived “sexual deviance.” As a result, Hollywood portrayed queer characters as either superfluous comedic relief, or especially deviant and nefarious vil-

lains that are ultimately vanquished by the white heterosexual hero. By demonstrating minorities in this stereotyped way, film and television perpetuated an incorrect and stereotyped social understanding of these minorities that further alienated and ostracized them.

In the 1990s Hollywood witnessed the birth of the New Queer Cinema, which ushered in a wave of films that embraced queer identity and aimed to portray it in a meaningful manner. Filmmakers in the New Queer Cinema, and the New New Queer Cinema since the early 2000s have manipulated the preexisting mechanisms of narrative filmmaking in a manner which creates striking and deep representations of queer identity and narratives that challenge the preconceived notions of minorities and turn Classical Hollywood's stereotyped archetypes of queer characters into real individuals, that both straight and queer audiences can relate to. Since then visibility has only increased, and meaningful representations have had a profound effect on social views of the queer community by influencing the personal connections viewers have with queer characters on-screen.

The meaningful representation of "othered" characters and communities and the personal connections they make with individual viewers have further reaching effects than just in the personal recognition of self or the other. Meaningful representations of characters and narratives are influential in the digestion and understanding of otherwise dry public policy issues. Film and television play an important part in the narrative research surrounding public policy by allowing viewers to become a part of the story, in-

stead of just spectators. The importance of narrative research extends beyond the scope of audience identification, it “has the potential to illustrate the negative consequences of limiting and discriminatory policy or demonstrate the need for new policies that support the rights of individuals left out of existing policies.”<sup>5</sup>

Narrative research puts a face and life to issues that have become so emotionless through the endless politicization and iterations of legislations. In order for narratives to have an impact on social policy they must be meaningful, a qualification that is especially important in our discussion of queer representation in film and television. These narratives are “able to portray the complex relationship between both damage and agency”<sup>6</sup>, demonstrating the nuanced effects of discriminatory policy on the personal everyday lives of individuals. *Orange is the New Black*’s Sophia Buset (Laverne Cox) is an especially powerful example of meaningful narratives. Sophia gives a powerful face and voice to the problematic imprisonment of transgender individuals and the subsequent mistreatment of them while in prison. The big human rights issue that the imprisoned transgender individuals face is the disregard of their preferred gender and forced placement into prisons based on their biological gender. An important aspect of Sophia’s narrative is that she is assigned to a prison based on her preferred gender identity, but the prison still keeps her away from her chosen identity through restricted access to essential hormones. In Litchfield, Sophia shows viewers the raw injustice of not being allowed to be who you

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<sup>5</sup> David M. Frost, and Suzanne C. Ouellette. "A Search for Meaning: Recognizing the Potential of Narrative Research in Social Policy-Making Efforts." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 8.3 (2011): 153. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Frost and Ouellette, 151.

are, through blatant transphobia as well as prison-restricted access to essential hormones. In the wake of *Orange is the New Black*'s success, Laverne Cox has used the momentum and success of Sophia in order to bring awareness to imprisoned transgender issues. By using the connection that Sophia has made with audiences, Cox has been able to contextualize the incredibly alien issue of transgender imprisonment, making large strides towards changing prison policy.

The impact of these representations of Sophia would not be as influential as they are had they been saddled with one-dimensional stereotypes of their sexual identities that made them a caricature of their communities. Meaningful narratives have a strong sense of realism, emotionally and contextually, which works to intensify audience identification and portray a world of stories and characters that are not so different from our own, "providing...audiences with the ability to listen to and envision responses to individuals' and groups' stories via systematic methods of analysis and interpretation."<sup>7</sup> Narratives thus allow us to contextualize complex human issues.

In the following chapters I explore how specific films and television shows use the preexisting structure and mechanics of narrative film in order to create queer characters and stories that defy their otherness and stereotypes, thus creating a profound cinematic experience. Not only does the manipulation of these structures and mechanics heighten the realism and depth of the narrative at hand, it also enhances audience identification by allowing queer viewers to find themselves and straight viewers to understand

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<sup>7</sup> Frost and Ouellette, 151.

the “other.” In this manner, the New New Queer Cinema and television have had lasting effects on the modern gay rights movement, changing perceptions and attitudes of society on an extremely personal level and making way for incredible strides in public policy changes.

## Wild Things: Queer Women in Television

The queer woman in narrative cinema or television has historically functioned as an erotic object for the straight heterosexual male gaze. She has been positioned as a means to the end of the male hero's journey. Women are "the bearer[s] of meaning, not maker[s] of meaning"<sup>8</sup> while the men are the makers of meaning, or the makers of the narrative. Women are erotic objects included in cinema in order to be looked at and feed the sexual purposes of the male hero and, by identification, the fantasies of the male viewer. The objectification of women in film is popularly discussed in terms of Classical Hollywood pinups and Alfred Hitchcock's voyeurism; however, it is the queer woman, or the lesbian who epitomizes the position of the woman as an erotic object. In narrative film and television, the queer woman is stylized as an object with the singular purpose of titillating the straight male viewer. She is often presented in the narrative with no real context, her only signifier being a singular sexual encounter with another woman, usually in response to the male hero. Furthermore, representations of the queer woman in texts after the millennium are distinctively stylized as "femme," which is essentially a "synonym for heterosexual."<sup>9</sup> This stylization conforms to existing expectations of gender roles, allowing the queer woman to be a physically and socially erotic object. The queer woman participates in sexual acts but never in the context of a real relationship, as Kanye West lyrically states, "Girls kissing girls, cause it's hot, right? /But unless they use a

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Beirne. *Lesbians in Television and Text after the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 99. Print.



strap-on then they not dykes.”<sup>10</sup> West represents the sentiments of heterosexual men who see lesbian sexuality as titillating as long as it does not assume the sexual dominance or power of the male phallus. The queering of women in popular media is not meant to establish a representation of queer women, but rather to stimulate the sexual fantasies of the male hero and by extension, the male viewer.

The 1998 pulpy crime drama *Wild Things* demonstrates this with the queering of Suzie Toller and Kelly Van Ryan. Played by Neve Campbell and Denise Richards, respectively, Suzie and Kelly are two high-schoolers who frame their teacher for rape with the intention of extorting money from the resulting trial. The narrative is paused for the “erotic contemplation”<sup>11</sup> of Suzie and Kelly, who have a tangential sexual encounter in a pool, which is filmed by a male character, thus literally aligning it with the heterosexual male gaze. Later in the film, the position of Suzie and Kelly as erotic objects for the male viewer and the male protagonist is again clearly presented in a threesome between Suzie Kelly and Sam, the teacher. The progression of the threesome is guided, quite literally, by the hand of Sam which continuously forces the two women together as he watches, which stimulates him sexually.

*The O.C.*, a well-known television show, objectifies queer women in a more intellectual, albeit just as sexual, manner. The relationship between, two young female characters, Marissa and Alex, is a reactionary one. They find each other at a local dive bar,

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<sup>10</sup> Kanye West, Chief Keef, Pusha T, Big Sean, and Jadakiss. *I Don't Like*. Kanye West. Rec. 1 May 2012. Young Chop, Kanye West, The Twilite Zone, Noah Goldstein, Mike WiLL, 2012. MP3.

<sup>11</sup> Mulvey, 10.

bonding over shared experiences of rejection and enter into a relationship because Marissa's heart was broken by a man. The queer "relationship" is a reaction to a man, and serves as an interlude until the man reenters the picture. Furthermore the two women are stylized as hypersexual under the guise of trendiness. Both wear heavy makeup, bare midriffs and share sultry stares from across the room. They are the ultimate femme lesbians that the heterosexual male gaze craves to see sexually entangled for his own pleasure. The hypersexualization and objectification of queer women in this show is an inescapable byproduct of the inherent heterosexual male gaze of the camera, and to a certain extent will always be present in narrative cinema and television, especially as it has proven to be a profitable narrative device. The increasing frequency of appearances of lesbians and queer women on television and in film is a step in the right direction; however as noted previously, their portrayal is oftentimes one-dimensional, clearly dominated by the tradition of the heterosexual male gaze that has proven to be an inescapable narrative device.

*The L Word* premiered on Showtime in 2004, right on the heels of *Sex and the City's* final run. The influence of *Sex and the City* was profound on not only *The L Word*, but on television in general. The HBO hit reclaimed female sexuality and made women talking about sex, sexy. *Sex and the City* imparted a degree of sexual empowerment on young viewers, but despite its feminist intentions, it suffered severely from the way the heterosexual male gaze interacted with feminine sexuality. Carrie, Samantha and their friends were very frank about their sexuality, but despite their refreshing honesty, their

actions were always reactions to a man. Their sexuality was also always purposed in service to the men in their lives. *Sex and the City*'s wide popularity and sexy success put pressure on other networks to find the next *Sex and the City*, and in 2004 it seemed that Showtime had found it with *The L Word*.

Coyly titled, *The L Word* (does the "L" stand for lesbians? Or love? Or lust?) was Showtime's answer to *Sex and the City*; where *Sex and the City* explored female relationships and sexuality, *The L Word* intended to do the same with queer women. Like *Sex and the City*, *The L Word* also tried to reclaim sexuality in a more meaningful and respectful manner for queer women. Like *Sex and the City*, *The L Word* was dominated by the heterosexual male gaze, and the persistent necessity to objectify and commodify "glamorous, feminine...lesbians"<sup>12</sup> for the pleasure of male viewers. The fact that the show was written by a queer woman indicated potential for an inversion of the heterosexual male gaze; however, the inversion of the gaze did not guarantee the steady viewers and ratings that the network desired.

Showtime executive Gary Levine explained that the network's decision to move forward with this exciting new show was predicated on "its potential appeal to non-lesbian viewers [that] rested on the understanding that lesbian sex, girl-on-girl, is a whole cottage industry for heterosexual men."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the potential for the show to be

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<sup>12</sup> Beirne, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Akass and McCabe, xx.

“pud [masturbatory] fodder for Joe Sixpack”<sup>14</sup> across the nation was more profitable and therefore more important than its potential to explore the lives and the love of queer women in depth. Even though GLAAD<sup>15</sup> noted that the use of the “porn connection” as being an important tool to attract viewers to “learn about the lives of lesbians,”<sup>16</sup> the porn like depictions of lesbians and lesbian sex frequently overpowered many of the show’s meaningful narratives. Instead of watching *The L Word* to see how Dana handles her sexuality in the context of being a professional athlete, viewers were watching for the next racy sexcapades of Shane.

*The L Word* was admittedly an extremely faulty show in the way of meaningful narratives and representation for queer women that did not rely on objectification; nevertheless, the show did pave the way for the appearance of more queer women in mainstream television and film. The problematic heterosexual male gaze and its objectification of queer women was evident in *The L Word*, and was almost certainly a catalyst in the recent movements challenging such sexualization. Representation is changing; lesbians and queer women are transcending their position as erotic objects and becoming an integral part, if not the major part, of television narratives. Narrative cinema and especially television are responding to a growing audience desire for quality queer characters, not just quantity. As a result more and more lesbian characters are being portrayed as recur-

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<sup>14</sup> Beirne, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Note: The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation which monitors the quality of LGBTQ representation in the media.

<sup>16</sup> Akass and McCabe, xx.

ring characters that are presented with context and stories as opposed to pure sexuality. As Mulvey points out, and as *The L Word* demonstrates, the straight heterosexual male gaze is overpowering and we cannot hope to destroy it, only reinvent it in order to develop narratives with dynamic female (queer female characters in our case) that transcend their cinematic destiny as erotic objects. Writer and producer Shonda Rhimes has made great strides for the portrayal of queer women by taking the straight heterosexual male gaze of the camera and inverting it into a queer female gaze. This is done with the intent to facilitate audience identification with a queer female character, Callie. Shonda's inversion of the camera in *Grey's Anatomy* is done through a simple exclusion in the narrative, the refusal to hypersexualize the queer female characters or emphasize their sexualities in the absence of context. Callie's first queer relationship is almost devoid of sex, but instead is rife with emotion.

By 2007, *Grey's Anatomy* had already been dominating primetime on ABC's Thursday nights. We twenty-something's were all obsessed, and we were all irrationally invested in the lives of the Seattle Grace doctors. In the season three finale "17 Seconds," Shonda Rhimes added a member to the Seattle Grace family, Dr. Erica Hahn. Erica was a brilliant cardiothoracic surgeon, the perfect mentor for Cristina Yang and a new love interest for Dr. Callie Torres. The beginning of Callie and Erica's, or "Callica" if you will, relationship was weird, awkward, and not very sexy. Both Callie and Erica are attractive women, and sexualizing them would be easy, but with Shonda's inverted gaze, these two women became something more than erotic objects. This was one of the first instances in

primetime television that two queer female characters had been introduced as a part of a narrative with a relationship that was more complex than a one-night stand. Callie and Erica's awkward courtship lasted for a season until Callie worked up the guts to kiss Erica in the season four finale. What distinguished this kiss, and subsequently this relationship, from others before it, was the inversion of the camera's gaze and the dedication of the writers to portraying the passion of the relationship as opposed to capitalizing on its sex appeal.

Callie and Erica's relationship was an important step away from the one-dimensional hypersexualization and objectification of queer women that had heretofore dominated narrative film and television. Queer women were starting to be presented as characters that transcended labels of sexuality and traditional roles as erotic objects. While "Callica" only lasted until half-way through season five of *Grey's Anatomy*, Callie continued to be an outstanding example of queer female representation. Shonda's emphasis on emotion and passion, as opposed to sex is further demonstrated in the portrayal of Callie's struggle with her sexuality and consequential coming out. If through her relationship with Erica, *Grey's* encourages identification with uncontrollable romantic emotion towards someone, Callie's coming out facilitates a truly empathetic identification through an emotional tragedy with the character of Callie and the community that she represents. The added complexity of audience identification to Shonda's inverted gaze adds context to a character and a community that were previously identified solely by their position as sexual objects. Through the confusion and the familial tragedy of her coming out, and the

discussion of the religious, political and personal implications, *Grey's* takes the audience deep into the world of the queer woman.

In the wake of her relationship and break-up with Erica, Callie went through a crisis of sexual identity. Callie had only dated men before Erica and as a result struggled immensely with her sexuality; was she gay? Was she straight? Was she bisexual? Throughout the course of several seasons Callie struggled with questions of her sexuality internally as well as externally with her friends. The depiction of her internal and purely emotional struggle as well as her attempts to verbalize what she was going through created an incredible doorway for audience identification with Callie's struggle. The culmination of Callie's crisis perpetuated an emotional identification with the repeated emphasis of Callie's worth as a person completely independent of sexuality. The season five "Sweet Surrender" and season six episode "Invasion" are examples of the depiction of her poignant and eloquent struggle. Both episodes focus on the scariest part of a queer person's life: coming out. These two episodes accomplish a delicate yet powerful presentation of the coming-out process by acting as two sides of the same account; "Sweet Surrender" is the emotional struggle between Callie and her father, and "Invasion" is a depiction of Callie embracing her sexuality and her right to be happy. These two episodes, and the development of Callie and her sexuality continue to use Shonda's inverted gaze to depict a queer female character that is deeply complex and not defined by sexuality.

In "Sweet Surrender" Carlos Torres, Callie's extremely supportive yet very traditional and religious father, comes to visit in the wake of his daughter's recent divorce. In

a truly comic moment, Carlos aggressively interrogates Callie's male colleagues in an attempt to find out who she is dating. Callie is completely embarrassed and in trying to stop her father from harassing anyone else, she comes out to him. Pulling her new girlfriend to her side, Callie addresses Carlos, "Dad, this is Arizona Robbins; this is who I am dating now."<sup>17</sup> As she verbalizes her relationship and sexuality to her father in that moment, complete relief washes over her face only to be replaced with despair as her proclamation is met by denial and rejection from Carlos. Carlos refuses to believe or acknowledge his daughter's obvious happiness, let alone her relationship or sexuality. At the end of the episode, Carlos threatens to cut Callie off from financial support if she does not break up with Arizona, and return to men. In a heartbreaking moment, Callie finally breaks down with tears streaming down her face, hugging Arizona, "if he [Carlos] can't accept me for who I am...I [will] cut *him* off."<sup>18</sup> The once strong relationship between Callie and Carlos is severed by closed mindedness and the inability to see beyond labels and social conventions. Not only is this episode extremely representative of the struggle many queer individuals must face when coming out, it pits a conventional heteronormative male character against an unconventional queer woman. The reversal of roles, conventional versus unconventional, is indicative of the inverted gaze and is a powerful contrast that encourages a powerful empathetic identification with Callie. This is not only a

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<sup>17</sup> Shonda Rhimes, and Sonay Washington. "Sweet Surrender." *Grey's Anatomy*. ABC. Los Angeles, CA, 23 Apr. 2009. Television. 6:00

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



moment of honesty that queer viewers can empathize with greatly, but also one that straight viewers can use to begin to understand aspects of the queer community.

One year after coming out to Carlos, Callie encounters her estranged father in the waiting room of Seattle Grace Hospital. She is confused yet also hopeful, but after embracing her father, she notices that he had brought Father Kevin with him. She immediately realizes that Father Kevin is there for a religious intervention on her sexuality. In one of the most iconic and powerful moments in queer television, Callie, flustered and upset, turns and faces her father while backing down the hallway screaming, “YOU CAN’T PRAY AWAY THE GAY!”<sup>19</sup> The addition of Father Kevin and the emphasis placed on religious bigotry further illustrates the reversed battle of the conventional and familiar with the unconventional “other.” The first meeting between Callie, Carlos, and Father Kevin sets the tone for the rest of the episode: solemn defiance. No longer is Callie a heartbroken little girl; instead, she is a proud woman, who despite her broken heart is prepared to stand up for herself and for her happiness. The hallmark moment in this episode occurs in the seventeenth minute, in which Callie is met with a Carlos and Father Kevin’s formal intervention in an empty conference room. Sitting in the dark conference room, Carlos vehemently states that Callie’s sexuality is “an abomination, it’s an eternity in hell.”<sup>20</sup> He believes that Callie’s sexuality is his fault, a product of his mistakes in raising Callie as a child. Ignoring Callie’s pleas for understanding, acceptance and love, Car-

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<sup>19</sup> Shonda Rhimes, and Mark Wilding. "Invasion." *Grey's Anatomy*. ABC. Los Angeles, CA, 15 Oct. 2009. Television.

<sup>20</sup> Rhimes and Wilding, “Invasion.”

los continues by quoting directly from Leviticus, to which Callie responds by quoting Biblical verses of love and acceptance. The writing, direction, and acting in this scene together to create a powerful moment between father and daughter, hate and love, that tragically mirror the attitude dynamics between thousands of families and queer children.

The power of this scene is not just derived from the battle between the familiar and the other, but also from the way in which Callie responds to her father. Carlos enters the room an estranged man, someone who loves his faith so deeply it caused him to abandon his daughter. His convictions are strong and they are steady, and through his combined love for God and for Callie, he returns ready to change his daughter, and to bring her back to the “light.” The power of Carlos’s convictions and the respectful dynamic between father and daughter predicts an intervention in which Callie would have to grudgingly accept to be “saved,” or weakly leave the room abandoning her father for good. But the intervention plays out in a completely opposite manner. Callie stands up to her father and his oppressive and conventional attitudes. She confidently and calmly counters the hate, fighting it with teachings of love, and without completely abandoning or villainizing religion and faith, emphasizing that “Jesus is my savior daddy, not you, and Jesus would be ashamed of you for turning your back on me.”<sup>21</sup> Callie gives a voice to the many queer individuals who have been overpowered by respect for a familial or religious figure into a submissive state, unable to fight for their rights, for their love, or for

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

their happiness. In this episode Calliope Iphigenia Torres represents everything that the queer community has been fighting for: love.

The emphasis that *Grey's Anatomy* places on the emotion of Callie's struggle, her relationships, and her life in general, creates a strong empathetic connection with Callie. The audience feels for her and with her as she struggles with her father's and her own acceptance of her sexuality. This identification is facilitated by the inversion of the traditional heterosexual male gaze, which de-eroticizes Callie as a queer woman, and presents her within the narrative as a dynamic, emotional, and relatable character. Moreover, Callie is found within the narrative as an individual and not as just an erotic pit stop on the male hero's journey.

Where Shonda Rhimes and *Grey's Anatomy* invert the heterosexual male gaze and attempt to de-eroticize the queer woman, CBS' *The Good Wife* harnesses the straight heterosexual male gaze in order to problematize it. Where *Grey's Anatomy* facilitates the identification *with* a queer woman and her reaction to her own sexuality, *The Good Wife* uses the straight heterosexual male gaze to facilitate identification with the straight characters and their reaction to a queer woman, Kalinda. This new heterosexual male gaze is ultimately sympathetic to the queer women, emphasized only by the introduction of a hyper-heteronormative and masculine character.

The character of Kalinda is an enigma in the world of queer female characters in narrative film and television. Kalinda is "an East Indian stunner. Bollywood Erin

Brokovich. No-nonsense, independent, a cool temperament, nonchalantly bisexual.”<sup>22</sup>

And although the Pilot script recognizes her bisexuality, it is a recognized non-issue throughout the series. Similar to how *The Good Wife* combines the traditional heterosexual male gaze with the inverted gaze, Kalinda is a complex queer character that is both extremely sexy and an emotional human being. Actress Archie Panjabi describes Kalinda with respect, as being “a woman of color who continually challenges cultural norms regarding how, who and what women ‘should’ be. She refuses to be defined or confined by preconceived norms.”<sup>23</sup>

Kalinda’s position as an extremely complex queer character is owed to the way in which her character was developed. Writers Robert and Michelle King developed Kalinda’s character for twenty-two episodes before the topic of her sexuality was discussed. The Kings were dedicated to the proper depiction of Kalinda, who wasn’t so sexy that she was “intimidating and...cheap.”<sup>24</sup> The Kings and Panjabi established a perfectly balanced representation and development of a queer woman that allowed the audience to know and fall in love with Kalinda without judging her because of her sexual identity. Unlike Callie Torres, Kalinda has already come to terms with her sexuality; she is comfortable with it and has no need to explain it to anyone. Even when her sexuality is ques-

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle King, and Robert King. “Pilot” *The Good Wife*. 29 Jan. 2009. Script.

<sup>23</sup> Archie Panjabi. "Foreword by Archie Panjabi." Foreword. *Bullying: Experiences and Discourses of Sexuality and Gender*. Ed. Ian Rivers and Neil Duncan. London: Routledge, 2013. xv. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Jace Lacob. "The Good Wife: Archie Panjabi Talks About Playing Kalinda." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, 14 Feb. 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

tioned, in season one's penultimate episode, Kalinda discusses it with the same amount of attention one would pay to a discussion about their left toe. The gaze of the camera is evident in the reaction of Kalinda's friend and colleagues Alicia Florrick and Cary Agos, who struggle more with her sexuality than Kalinda herself does. The heterosexual male gaze identifies with the heterosexual characters who are experiencing the same emotions with the comprehension of Kalinda's "otherness" as a queer woman. Ultimately this is a heterosexual male gaze that is sympathetic to Kalinda, facilitating through identification the understanding of Kalinda and the community she represents. The sympathetic identification with a queer character through a predominantly heterosexual gaze and characters is familiar and comfortable for many viewers, *The Good Wife* pushes the use of the heterosexual male gaze and problematizes it by introducing Kalinda's husband, Nick.

In season four, *The Good Wife* attempted to explore Kalinda's past by re-introducing her ex-husband into her life. The ex-husband, Nick, was abrasive, physically abusive, and completely disgusting: to Kalinda, and the majority of viewers, Nick was the mold in your shower that never goes away. For all intents and purposes, Nick was supposed to affirm the heterosexual male gaze. Here was a heterosexual male character with a romantic past that had the potential to "correct" Kalinda's inherent bisexual "otherness." Furthermore, Nick seems to compliment Alicia and Cary in *The Good Wife*'s in his heterosexual struggle with queerness. Unlike Alicia and Cary, Nick made this contemplation within the text and through identification in the audience extremely problematic. Nick's reactions to Kalinda's sexuality are put in direct contrast to those of Cary and Alicia. He

represents a hyper-heteronormative heterosexual male gaze that is and demonstrates the eroticization of Kalinda as an object.

To Nick, Kalinda is nothing more than an object serving two purposes: satisfying his sexual needs and fantasies and affirming his masculinity. Kalinda's sexuality is acknowledged by Nick, but only so far as it serves to arouse him. Further positioning himself with the heterosexual male gaze, Nick is frequently voyeuristically positioned as the "watcher" of Kalinda's sexual relationship with FBI agent Lana. In the wake of any interaction Kalinda and Lana have, Nick initiates a sexual encounter of his own with Kalinda to affirm his masculinity and his role as *the* meaningful partner. Kalinda's bisexuality is stimulating, so long as it is just sexual, but as soon as her sexuality is defined in a real relationship with a woman, Nick is threatened. The idea that a woman, Lana, would be able to satisfy Kalinda sexually psychologically castrates Nick. This positions Kalinda as the villainous woman who threatens masculinity and castration by her lack of a phallus; it is the ultimate assertion of heteronormativity in the context of the cinematic heterosexual male gaze. The threat of castration is so intense that Nick (as other male characters have done when placed in this position) seeks to destroy the threat, which means he must both correct Kalinda's otherness and assert his sexual dominance and masculine desirability. Nick demands that there must be "no more of that college dorm stuff,"<sup>25</sup> creating a sexual binary between himself and Kalinda. This is a binary that is defined by traditional gender roles which enforce the dominance and validity of a heterosexual relationship.

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<sup>25</sup> Robert King, and Michelle King. "Two Girls, One Code." *The Good Wife*. CBS. Los Angeles, CA, 14 Oct. 2012. Television. 44:00

In an especially perverse scene with Kalinda in an ice cream parlor, Nick makes the assertion that he is not only the most meaningful partner for Kalinda, but also the best sexual partner. In this scene Nick and Kalinda are eating two large cones of soft serve ice cream as they take pointed jabs at each other over a relationship that for Kalinda is completely over, but one that Nick wants to keep alive. Kalinda's indifference and impatience with Nick is clear as she repeatedly questions his masculinity. Kalinda ended the relationship with Nick by leaving him while he was in jail, and the two discuss this event in this scene. While licking her ice cream cone, Kalinda tells Nick that she wishes that she saw his face when he realized that she had left, wondering if he cried, remarking "seriously, did it make you cry?"<sup>26</sup> In a clear attack on his emotional stability and masculinity as a hyperheteronormative man, Kalinda insinuates that macho-Nick was brought to his knees sobbing because he was simply left by a girl. Nick responds in a two-layered assertion of his masculinity, arguing his sexual desirability as well by emphasizing his expectations of Kalinda as his "loving wife"<sup>27</sup> and then forcefully fingering her under the table. His verbalization of his expectations demonstrates the emphasis that Nick, as a character, places on gender roles and social conventions. Kalinda defies both of these expectations inherently, but Nick desperately needs to keep them alive to maintain his relevance as a man. The fingering of Kalinda in a public place is meant to be a sexual act that is extremely stimulating because of its aggression and the taboo of it taking place in a public, family

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<sup>26</sup> Robert King, and Michelle King. "And the Law Won." *The Good Wife*. CBS. Los Angeles, CA, 7 Oct. 2012. Television.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

setting; nevertheless, it is only good for Nick as Kalinda clearly has no interest, “I remember you being better at it.”<sup>28</sup>

The contrast between Nick’s desperate attempts to assert his masculinity and uphold the gender roles between husband and wife is presented as so extreme that it is ultimately pathetic. Nick’s desire to “correct” the otherness of Kalinda falls in line with the inherent desire of the heterosexual male gaze; however the extremity of Nick calls that desire into question. By illustrating the implications of the heterosexual male gaze at its extremes, *The Good Wife* facilitates a discussion regarding the understanding and the acceptance of not only sexuality, but *love*. Nick, Cary, and Alicia are all heterosexual influences in Kalinda’s life, yet Nick is the only character that is offended and threatened by Kalinda’s sexuality and actively works to destroy it. Cary and Alicia both accept Kalinda for who she is and treat her sexuality as a non-issue, she is “private”<sup>29</sup> and they respect that. The presence of Nick and his extreme behavior serves the purpose of highlighting the respect that Cary and Alicia have for Kalinda, implying the rationality of respect and acceptance over the rejection and destruction that Nick represents.

The manipulation of the straight heterosexual male gaze and the recognition of the camera’s gaze and its impact on the identification of the audience with characters has been one of the most powerful narrative techniques for the increase in quality queer portrayals. The self-awareness of the straight heterosexual male gaze and the attempts to in-

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Robert King, and Michelle King. "Hybristophilia." *The Good Wife*. CBS. Los Angeles, CA, 18 May 2010. Television.



vert it and problematize it by filmmakers and writers demonstrates a profound shift in the representation of queer women and queer characters in general. It not only allows for a more dynamic portrayal of a historically one-dimensional community, but also for a more powerful connection between the audience and the narrative. This connection not only creates an engaging narrative, but also results in a profound identification between queer viewers and versions of themselves on screen, as well as straight viewers and “the other” on screen. Kimberly Pierce and Andrew Bienen take this manipulation of the camera’s gaze one step further in *Boys Don’t Cry* and apply it to the narrative of a character so profoundly removed from a traditional film audience, and creates an intimately emotional identification and relationship with the character.

## The Bluest Eyes in Texas

Queer women are not the only characters that are affected by the straight male gaze: transgender characters suffer a subtler but perhaps even more profound objectification because of the gaze. Not only are they destined to be “killer[s], sexual predator[s], or deranged psychopath[s],” the portrayal of transgender characters in narrative cinema are heavily commodified and objectified, often for the sake of comedy. This simplification of complex individuals and gender identities is a defense against the threat of castration that is presented by the transgender body, which “is the marker between difference and hegemony.”<sup>30</sup> Castration anxiety is a byproduct of the heterosexual male gaze that seeks to assert and maintain its power by emphasizing and asserting heteronormativity. The threat of castration, or castration anxiety, is the perceived attack against heteronormative dominance that is presented by the lack of a phallus. Where women present the threat of castration through their lack of a phallus, the transgender body does so through both intentional castration and intentional assumption of the phallus. The transgender body calls into question “identities previously conceived as stable, unchangeable, grounded, and ‘known’”; by ultimately altering their biological gender, transgender individuals disrupt normality—the social patriarchal heteronormative hierarchy of power.

The castration anxiety stems from two perceptions of the phallus. Heteronormative, patriarchal society deems the phallus as the ultimate symbol of power; transgender individuals view the phallus more simply, as a penis, its only purpose lying within their

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<sup>30</sup> Melissa Rigney. "Brandon Goes to Hollywood (1): Boys Don't Cry and the Transgender Body in Film." *Film Criticism* 28.2 (2003) Print.

personal gender identity, something that can be changed. Heterosexual men and society value the power of the phallus so highly that the ultimate fear is that losing the symbol will change men into being women. By extension, if women assert their masculinity (an aspect of the symbolic phallus), they will obtain the power that heterosexual men once held—men do not want to become “weak, fragile...dependent”<sup>31</sup> like women. The transgender body illustrates this fear in a tangible and physical manner, but the most glaring offense of this is the simple fact that the transgender body regards the phallus only as a physical marker not a trait of power. The two very different understandings and values of the phallus as a symbol and as an object intensify the castration anxiety, as heteronormative society takes offense at the ease in which transgender individuals can assume or release the phallus—a disregard to the power of the phallus as a societal symbol.

As a result of the threat that they present both on screen and off, transgender characters are frequently portrayed in a one-dimensional manner that emphasizes their otherness in an effort to affirm heteronormative gender roles. In response to the castration anxiety, narrative film and television have focused on the spectacle of cross-dressing (a byproduct of social obsession with “the transition”) in order to explore and ultimately destroy the threat of the transgender body by returning it back into the confines of heteronormativity. Most often the spectacle of cross-dressing is used as the punch-line to a romantic comedy in which the cross-dresser is constantly in danger of being unveiled by those he or she is trying to deceive. In the end of the narrative the cross-dresser is ulti-

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<sup>31</sup> Rigney, 9.

mately unveiled and wins entry into a heterosexual relationship. The establishment of a heterosexual (normal) relationship after the cross-dresser is unveiled illustrates the narrative and the gaze's desire to maintain gender roles and norms—preventing the queering from becoming established and trustworthy and potentially usurping the power of the heterosexual cis-male. Narrative film's use of the spectacle of cross-dressing affirms heteronormativity in two ways: first, it gives (usually a male) access into an unknown world in order to understand women; second, the physical unveiling of the cross-dresser emphasizes heteronormativity because it shatters the queerness of the previously “accepted” body and asserts that a relationship between opposite genders can only occur, truthfully, in a heterosexual manner. *Some Like it Hot* and *She's the Man* demonstrate this in both the man-as-woman and woman-as-man cross-dressing: I consider the implications of each in the analysis below.

Let us contrast the use of the spectacle of cross-dressing in Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* and the 2006 Amanda Bynes' film *She's the Man*. Both films are romantic comedies in which the comedy depends on the spectacle of cross-dressing, and the narratives culminate in a satisfying *heterosexual* romantic end. *Some Like It Hot* tells the story of two men, Joe and Jerry, who after witnessing the St. Valentine's Day massacre flee Chicago with an all-girls band disguised as women. Fleeing Chicago and running from danger is not especially terrifying for Joe and Jerry because they end up escaping it into the arms of beautiful women. The men, as women, enter into relationships with other women, and are lusted after by men. Nevertheless in the conclusion of the film, the un-

veiling emphasizes that Joe and Jerry will never be able to pass as women into meaningful relationships, to do so they must maintain their biological gender identity and enter into a heterosexual relationship.

The 2006 film *She's the Man* follows in the same vein as *Some Like it Hot*. Based on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the film follows Olivia, who assumes the identity of her twin brother, Sebastian, in order to play soccer at his boarding school when her own team is cut. While the narrative of *She's the Man* poses a much more complicated proposition to the traditional patriarchal structure (a woman whose goal is to prove her skill is as good as, or better than, men), it still wallows in the spectacle of cross-dressing as a primary source of humor. Throughout the film the threat of "the unveil" is used to for physical humor: Olivia-as-Sebastian meticulously packs her tampons away, only to have them spill in front of her teammates. Just like *Some Like It Hot*, however the unveiling of Olivia implies that none of the relationships she formed while cross-dressing were valid, and now only the heterosexual one that she forms after being unveiled remains intact. The spectacle of Olivia's cross-dressing in *She's The Man* is further complicated by the manner in which Olivia's unveiling leads to a period of immense distrust and aversion by some of her closest friends. The combination of distrust towards Olivia's "lie" regarding gender-identity and the use of it as a punch-line illustrates the flawed, yet common, perception of cross-dressing and transgender identity: "it is funny, but ultimately we cannot trust it, because it is fundamentally a lie that disrupts social order."

Because of its frequent use in narrative story telling, from Shakespeare to Billy Wilder and Amanda Bynes, the humorous spectacle of cross-dressing has become a familiar feature of narrative cinema. We have grown accustomed to the commodified and stereotyped presentation of the spectacle of cross-dressing. Our comfort with cross-dressing has extended to an anticipation and expectation of the “reveal” that brings the cross-dresser back into the fold of hetero-normative gender rules and entering into a satisfying heterosexual relationship; this expectation and anticipation results in a skeptical perception of individuals who are perceived as cross-dressing, namely transgender individuals. We do not trust cross-dressing individuals and their gender identity because we have been taught to always expect them to be “revealed.” As a result, through its use as a comedic trope we, as an audience, have been trained to not trust the validity of a transgender individual’s gender identity. Because of the commodification of cross-dressing audiences cannot and do not believe truth of a trans individual’s gender identity, which has made representation of these individuals on screen extremely difficult. If an audience does not believe and therefore cannot connect with a character how can a compelling narrative be told?

The representation of the transgender character Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* challenges the gender binary and the heterosexual gaze of cinema, in order to produce a compelling narrative. Similarly to the way in which *The Good Wife* harnesses the gaze in order to problematize it, *Boys Don't Cry* embodies the heterosexual male gaze and disrupts its comfort and assumptions of patriarchal gender roles. *Boys Don't Cry* places emphasis

on the sincerity of Brandon's naiveté, creating a stark contrast with the brutality of his murder and an empathetic relationship between the viewer and Brandon. Kimberly Pierce and Andy Bienen take up the very true story of Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* and create a humanizing narrative that centers on hope, change, and love in an all-American blue-collar working class background, with a transgender character. *Boys Don't Cry* was the first somewhat mainstream film to feature such an honest and loving representation of a transgender character. Brandon transcended the transgender criminal narrative destiny and became Brandon, the boyishly handsome, womanizing, jerk next-door, who we all fell in love with.

*Boys Don't Cry* harnesses the commodified and problematic spectacle of "cross-dressing" and uses it to provide a window for audience identification, proving the validity of Brandon's gender identity. Unlike the traditional and familiar representation of cross-dressing that continues to uphold traditional gender roles, *Boys Don't Cry* goes to great lengths to portray its belief of cross-dressing, trusting the assumed gender identity. The film almost unconditionally recognizes Brandon as a young man for its entirety. This belief and trust is established in the opening scene of the film, where Pierce brings Brandon to life "in a way that was universally understandable,"<sup>32</sup> positioning the camera over his shoulder, peering into a mirror, watching him get ready. By engaging in the act of cross-dressing with Brandon and his cousin Lonnie, the camera becomes a part of the spectacle, and it believes that the spectacle is true.

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<sup>32</sup> Julianne Pidduck. "The Boys Don't Cry Debate; "Risk and Queer Spectatorship"" *Queer Screen: A Screen Reader*. Ed. Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

The use of a mirror to emphasize viewer identification is not new in cinema. The mirror plays an important role in audience recognition and identification with a character in narrative film. The mirror, both the literal object as well as the figurative idea of the mirrored image, is especially powerful in *Boys Don't Cry*. It offers a window directly into the lives of a character at his most vulnerable state, when he is assessing and masking his perceived flaws. This is especially important when trying to create a compelling narrative about a very “othered” character that is threatened by heteronormativity. The mirror offers viewers a window into the life of transgender character Brandon Teena, encouraging identification with him, through the “universally understandable” process of self evaluation. Furthermore, by watching Brandon’s ritual of externally embodying his gender identity, the camera begins to trust his identity; we in turn trust the camera, and therefore trust Brandon, our protagonist.

The trust of Brandon that is built in this scene is further emphasized by the presence of Brandon’s cousin Lonnie. Lonnie is a man, and for all intents and purposes represents and is positioned as a manifestation of the male gaze of the camera. As a man, Lonnie should be threatened by Brandon and his gender identity (i.e. the easy assumption of a phallus). In one instance we are led to believe that Lonnie will object to Brandon’s masquerade, when Brandon stuffs a sock into his jeans. Lonnie looks at Brandon (through the mirror) and moves to say something, to disrupt the masquerade, but he just criticizes the size of the sock, “That is the most frightening thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”<sup>33</sup> The au-

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<sup>33</sup> *Boys Don't Cry*. Dir. Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen. Perf. Hillary Swank, Chloe Sevigny. Fox Searchlight, 1999.



dience is lead to believe that this heterosexual male is going to prevent Brandon from assuming his gender identity (when Lonnie refers to Brandon as Teena), however the only objections that he makes are towards the size of Brandon's "phallus" and a ten-gallon hat Brandon dons at the roller rink. These two objections are directed towards how Brandon looks, Lonnie ensures that Brandon looks perfect before his date—something we all do—but never prevents him from assuming this gender identity or ridiculing him for it. Lonnie, the closest presentation of the audience's sentiments on screen believes and trusts Brandon's gender identity, therefore we must too.

The mirror functions as a portal that reflects back upon the looker, what he or she desires to see. For Brandon, this is his gender-identity—his cool, calm, lady-killing good looks and personality. Brandon's belief in his identity is affirmed by his cousin Lonnie, who only interjects the ritual of getting ready by chastising Brandon for putting too big of a sock in his pants, and for looking ridiculous in a ten-gallon hat. Later in the film, when Brandon is "unveiled" a mirroring image of Brandon looking at Brandon reminds both Brandon and the audience that despite the "unveiling," Brandon's identity is still unharmed. A beaten and naked Brandon is held up like a trophy by two men, positioning Brandon as a trophy for the triumph of heterosexuality. He is laid bare and vulnerable for all to judge him and his façade of cross-dressing. However in this instant the camera focuses in on the naked face of Brandon which looks up and past the group of people silently judging in disbelief and into the eyes of his mirror reflection. His reflection is of what Brandon believes he looks like, it is him fully clothed, embracing his gender-identity.

This scene between the two Brandon's emphasizes the truth of his gender-identity; regardless of biological determinants, Brandon believes that he is a man, and even in his most vulnerable and naked state he continues to believe. The contrast between the heterosexual need to unveil the "other" and his silent acceptance and resistance to societal pressure inspires sympathetic identification with the desire to believe and fight for the truth of Brandon's gender-identity. Brandon's strong and unwavering belief in himself, even in the most trying of circumstances is a powerful empathetic identification device. Despite his unjust victimization, Brandon stays true to himself—so shouldn't we, the viewer, regard him in the same manner?

*Boys Don't Cry* aligns us with Brandon and the truth of his gender identity. By establishing trust in Brandon from the beginning of the film, *Boys Don't Cry* allows us to fall seamlessly into his life. The strong empathetic connection that is established between us, the audience, and Brandon brings the character to life, adding more emotional complexity to his tragedy. The emotional, beautiful and strong empathetic connection that is established between Brandon and the audience is set in contrast to the harsh brutality of Tom Niessen, John Lotter, and the murder. Despite Brandon's harmless, life, choices, and actions, his success in social popularity and romantic relationships pose such an intense threat to the masculinity of Tom and John that their only solution is to destroy Brandon and his unconventional masculinity. It is Brandon's soft features and old school Hollywood charm, a la Dean and Brando, that the women of Falls City desire, not the reckless, violent hyper-heterosexual masculinity of Tom and John. The portrayal of Brandon Teena

in *Boys Don't Cry* is even more powerful and its importance is even more visible when placed in contrast with the portrayal of Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

The comparison between these two films demonstrates a larger issue at play in the representation of the transgender community and queer community as a whole that is fundamentally problematic: the generalized lack of understanding on behalf of filmmakers for the marginalized community they are attempting to portray. Pierce and Bienen created a powerfully empathetic character in the representation of Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*. *Boys Don't Cry* made us fall in love with the “other” and started a larger discussion about the stunted understanding of marginalized people—an understanding that, as the film argues, has resulted in ruthless violence and death. Brandon gave a voice to a misunderstood community. While this voice wasn't perfect, it still believed and trusted the gender identity of Brandon.

*Dallas Buyers Club* is similar to *Boys Don't Cry*'s; both films feature a central transgender character that is attempting to break stereotypes. Like *Boys Don't Cry*, *Dallas Buyers Club* is based on true story from which it takes some creative license to create an engaging narrative. *Dallas Buyers Club* is a period piece, it takes place in Texas during the height of the AIDS crisis and follows the journey of hyper-heterosexual cowboy, Ron Woodruff, to cure and ultimately live beyond the death sentence the disease promised. Ron is accompanied by a flamboyant and charming pre-op male-to-female transgender woman, Rayon (also HIV positive). Rayon is a completely fictional character, in a way that Brandon never was. Nevertheless both cinematic representations of these characters

are developed from a certain kind of fiction. The creative designers behind the films had to decide the narrative of these characters to focus on and then build a powerful story from. For *Boys Don't Cry* this meant developing a strong empathetic connection with the audience, allowing them to step into the shoes of Brandon, by focusing on a simple tragic love story that shaped the last few months of his life. For *Dallas Buyers Club* the development of Rayon is a counterpoint to Ron Woodruff, serving the dual purpose of character development for Ron (in that he overcomes his homophobia and becomes tolerant of an alienated community through their shared misfortune—they are not that much different from each other, both suffering, trying to survive), and demonstrating the other more famously recognized community (queer) of people that suffered so intensely from the AIDS crisis.

The portrayal of Rayon completely misses the mark, especially when considered in comparison to that of Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry*. While Rayon can be, and has been, applauded simply for her existence, the appearance of a transgender character on screen is not enough. As trans filmmaker Kimberly Reed describes it, the character of Rayon was built off of a “fossilized portrait of a community.”<sup>34</sup> Rayon is “the victimized dingbat whose incompetence and unreliability exists to show how far Woodruff has come both as a businessman and a human being;”<sup>35</sup> Rayon is a one-dimensional prop on which to hang the contrasting and starkly heterosexual male character’s benevolent sympathy. Where

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<sup>34</sup> Kimberly Reed. "Interview with Kimberly Reed." Telephone interview. 12 Mar. 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Friess. "Don't Applaud Jared Leto's Transgender 'Mammy' | TIME." *Time*. Time, 28 Feb. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2014.

*Dallas Buyers Club* essentially uses the “othered” body of Rayon to move the heterosexual male’s journey forward, *Boys Don’t Cry* recognizes the “othered” body of Brandon and over the course of the film puts us, the audience, into that body. Moreover, *Boys Don’t Cry* treats Brandon as not only a character, but a human in his own right, someone that despite his inherent “otherness” is equal to the surrounding characters. *Boys Don’t Cry*, trusts Brandon, and tries to understand him, an integral component of representation and one that is completely absent from the “sassy, tragic-yet-silly”<sup>36</sup> Rayon.

When we are faced with representations of the transgender body that force an already complicated subject to become unnecessarily more problematic, it is essential for the creators of that representation to understand the marginalized community they are portraying. If there is no understanding, or no desire to understand and connect, characters become represented by the stereotyped facets of their communities, as evidenced in *Dallas Buyers Club*. Kimberly Pierce and Hillary Swank breathed and lived the life of Brandon, they went to extraordinary measures in order to try and understand transgender individuals. But Brandon’s story didn’t just affect Pierce and Swank, the story and the project had an electrifying hold on the entire crew responsible for bringing it to life. Everyone involved with the film wanted to bring Brandon to life, they wanted to do his memory justice, and they wanted audiences to fall just as in love with that small town Nebraskan teenager as they did. Co-writer Andy Bienen recounts his initial hesitance to work on the project because he didn’t understand Brandon, a hesitance that was changed

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

after reading his story and being so inspired and electrified by Brandon's desire to believe in himself and in others.<sup>37</sup> The immense desire to understand and the connection between the filmmakers and the story allowed Brandon to become something more than a liar and a thief, out to disrupt social norms, as much as he disrupted check books, Brandon became a human, with a story of love and loss and self-awareness, that we can all understand. As a result, *Boys Don't Cry* left a powerful mark on transgender and straight viewers alike.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Andy Bienen. "Interview with Andy Bienen." Telephone interview. 28 Feb. 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Matt Kailey. "Ask Matt: Identifying with 'Boys Don't Cry'" Matt Kaileys Tranifesto. 9 June 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

## Small Screen, Big Picture

The characters of Brandon Teena, Callie Torres, and Kalinda Sharma have forged incredibly strong relationships with their audiences. The realism of their representation has created an audience identification that transcends the confines of passive viewership and throws the audience headfirst into a powerful relationship with the characters on screen. We feel like we know the characters, we understand their decisions, and ultimately, we feel like we have a relationship. The manipulation of film mechanics such as the straight male gaze and its tendency of objectifying marginalized characters as a way to depict dynamic and meaningful characters only augment the relationship between the audience and characters. It is the audience's interactions with the characters that lead to success both financially and artistically. The ultimate goal of narrative film and television is to create engaging and entertaining stories and characters, a task that cannot be done without drawing a strong connection between the characters and the narrative's audience: essentially, "the more involved we are with the fictional world and what happens to the people in it, the more likely we are to enjoy being entertained."<sup>39</sup> Creating a strong audience identification plays a crucial role in creating an entertaining narrative. Queer characters are an especially interesting phenomenon in the way that a quality representation of such characters creates an incredibly strong connection and a passionate community of fans who are invested in the prosperity of the characters on screen.

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<sup>39</sup> Cohen, 183.

The interaction with queer narratives in film and television occurs in two ways: personal identification of audience members with the cinematic representation of their own community; and the empathetic identification based in development of understanding with an “othered” character or community. These two different yet similar forms of identification with queer narratives and characters encourage the formation of self-identity (and comfort within it), as well as an understanding of what is different (comfort with the difference). The formation of audience identification, and the impact meaningful narratives have had on them, can be directly observed through the interactions between audience members in online fan communities, like Tumblr. Tumblr has served as a platform that both encourages the passion audiences feel for narratives as well as providing an ideologically safe community comprised of like-minded people. Tumblr points to the influence that queer narratives have on the formation of self-identity and the expression of that identity through fan fiction and the recycling of canonical imagery. Because Tumblr, in the past three years, has been “the most popular website amongst teenagers and young adults from the ages 13-25,”<sup>40</sup> it is an even more influential sphere of connection for those viewers. Furthermore, these personal experiences of queer audiences with queer narratives break out of the social “closet” allowing queer individuals to become more comfortable with their own self-expression. Simultaneously, straight audiences come to terms with the queer “other” and emerge with an understanding of the community. This

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<sup>40</sup> E. Harsin Drager. “Trans\*forming Cyber Space and the Trans Liberation Movement: A Study of Transmasculine Youth Bloggers on Tumblr.com”. Thesis. The Department of Ethnic Studies; Colorado State, 2012. Print.



works to combat ignorance and creates a safe environment amongst the heterosexual hegemony. The straight audience's acceptance of queer characters works in parallel with the comfort in the realization of queer self-identity, allowing that identity to be expressed and received comfortably within society. This has helped translate to a bigger picture, one of social change and wider social, political, and economic acceptance of an extremely marginalized community.

Over the past ten years the explosion of queer representation in narrative film and television and the fast-paced development of social media sites on the internet has created a communal sphere in which fans can come together and express their connection (and obsession) with characters and their stories. Many queer fans fall in love with characters and narratives and want to discuss them, but cannot discuss them in their immediate demographic sphere. In their attempt to look for a space and a community to discuss these on screen narratives, the queer audiences find Tumblr. Tumblr has become a home base for fans, allowing audiences to interact with the original texts and reclaim them as their own while still maintaining a portion of canonical source material. Tumblr is not only a space where audiences and their connections to characters are highly visible, but it is also a space that creates a safe community for the marginalized viewers. One avid Tumblr user attests to the power of the community:

The fact is that [Tumblr's] users can be themselves in ways that they would not be able to anywhere else. I participate as "me", and sometimes as how I would like to be in real life. I feel more confident about myself there.<sup>41</sup>

By looking at Tumblr, we can see how strong of a connection narratives have built with their audiences through the passion in which they create everything from gifs to memes to fan fiction. Furthermore, a perusal of character- and relationship-specific tags on Tumblr reveals more than just an unconditional passion for the characters but also an incredible protective attitude towards them.

Fans find themselves so connected with the characters that they are also incredibly protective over the way they are portrayed and the storylines on which they embark. Audiences feel they owe it to these characters to protect the integrity of their narratives, because of what these narratives have done for audience members, like a viewer who "will forever be grateful for it [the portrayal of Kalinda's sexuality], because her speech in 2.14 convinced my mom that bisexuals exist, and I feel like I can come out to her now."<sup>42</sup> In the wake of the incredibly controversial storyline that introduced Kalinda's husband in *The Good Wife*, the internet generally, and Tumblr particularly, were set ablaze with furious fans speaking out against this new relationship. Comments sections on episode recaps and Tumblr rants alike bring forth a slew of reactions such as julydoll10's: "The violence between Kalinda and Nick is very disturbing. Kalinda is an accomplished intelligent

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<sup>41</sup> Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter. "Tumblr Fandoms, Community & Culture." CSCW Video Program (2014) Web.

<sup>42</sup>"The Good Wife Confessions." Web log post. *Fuck Yeah, Kalinda Sharma!* 2013. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

woman and her role in this situation is disheartening”<sup>43</sup> and another user who says “i am sooooo sick of the kalinda and her abusive husband thing it’s degrading to women.”<sup>44</sup> And during the many breakups of *Glee*’s Santana and Brittany, Tumblr was again set on fire with the “feels” of devoted fans, heartbroken over a couple that acted as a model relationship for queer high-schoolers. The bond forged between these characters and the audience is so strong that the relationship transcends that between viewer and character and becomes a deeply emotional one more similar to relationships between actual individuals.

Tumblr offers a space for audiences and fans to extend the stories they see on screen beyond the screen and into their own spaces. This is especially important in television shows that take frequent and lengthy hiatuses. It allows fan to not only contribute to stories that they love but also to feel like they have become a part of them and to continue the narrative even when the “real” show is off air. As E. Drager Harsin recounts, delving into a community presented on screen and online (Tumblr) offers a welcoming alternative to a “geographic environment [that] was a black hole for...visibility and community”<sup>45</sup> allowing him to find a space in order to “understand more about who [he] was.”<sup>46</sup>

By engaging with the text and characters that they are passionate about through “canonical” imagery from the source itself, audiences develop an ownership over the nar-

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<sup>43</sup> Chris Harnick. "'The Good Wife' Recap: 'Two Girls, One Code' And An Affair Rumor." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 Oct. 2012. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Drager, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

ratives that they feel so strongly connected to. This deepens the connection that is initiated by the original text and develops an active participation with the narrative that allows the identification to extend beyond evoking a relatively passive emotional responses and into creating active, and tangible reactions and responses: fans are thus able to “emerge as co-partners in the creation process and evolve past a passive audience.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, through sites like Tumblr audiences become a part of the story, and can therefore more closely explore the journey of the characters with whom they identify. At the same time, these viewers are able to explore their own lives and identities through association with these characters and their stories.

In a sense, then, Tumblr participation is a visible and tangible realization of Cohen’s observation on identification: “Identification...allows viewers to vicariously ‘try on’ various roles, behaviors, and attitudes and imagine what they look and feel like and what their consequences may be.”<sup>48</sup> Essentially, the community of solidarity and space of expression with the original source material that Tumblr offers fans gives them agency and promotes them to a position that is more than just the traditional semi-removed role of the viewer. This in turn emphasizes the two-fold influence on the development of self-identity through the original narrative on screen and the reproduced narrative on the internet.

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<sup>47</sup> Hillman et al., 286.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen, 193.

The development of these strong fan interactions with the text, and the communities that social media sites provide for them have created a new way of thinking about the real-life manifestations of these fictional characters. In other words, the connection and the dynamic portrayals of these characters on screen with the audience has allowed queer viewers, especially adolescents, understand that its ok to be queer, to be different, but it is important to be true to yourself. Additionally, straight viewers gain access into the world in order to understand the “other” allowing the “other” to become not so different from themselves. This is especially evident in the consumption of narrative film and television by teenagers and young adults who “engage in wishful identification with characters that are somewhat older and reflect what they [teen audiences] would like to be.”<sup>49</sup>

The quality representation of characters and their stories that are engineered specifically for teenage viewers are especially important. Not only is the teenage, or young adult (18-25)<sup>50</sup> demographic incredibly profitable, it is also a demographic of individuals who are developing their senses of self-identity and are in need of visible role models to help them understand themselves. As E. Drager Harsin recounts in his own experience with visibility as a trans man, when there are no role models or just models that represent aspects of yourself or the version of yourself that you are striving to become in your geographic area, media representation becomes more important as it fills that gap<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Cohen, 187.

<sup>50</sup> "Under 25 and over 54 the Power of Demographic Outliers." Under 25 and Over 54 The Power of Demographic Outliers. 21 June 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Drager, 3.

Since the 80's and the dawn of the teen narrative in John Hughes' movies, these narratives have gone beyond the simple coming-of-age and finding-love narrative and have extended into discussions of ethnic and sexual self-identity. Just as *Boys Don't Cry's* Brandon Teena taught a lesson of being true to yourself, recent television series *Glee*, *Skins* and *Pretty Little Liars* continue to teach a lesson of legendary love, despite sexual orientation, and that "it will get better." No matter how scary coming to terms with your identity is, there will always be people around you that love and support you. This lesson has most notably been championed by Dan Savage in the "It Gets Better" campaign<sup>52</sup>, but it has been the most clearly represented by Kurt and Santana in *Glee*, Emily in *Skins*, and Paige in *Pretty Little Liars*.

The representation of these characters has been so profound, and true to the modern teenager and the teenage experience that their portrayals have created a strong bond with their audience. Kurt, Santana, Emily, and Paige all take the problems, however dramatic, that teenagers face with intense seriousness and, unlike many adults, treat topics of love and sexuality with truth, not dismissing them as being just a "phase" or superfluous just because of the age of those involved. The characters believe and trust the feelings and circumstances of adolescent viewers, which in turn allows the viewers to trust the on screen narratives strengthening. Because of this, the viewers of these particular three shows, and others like them, have forged an incredibly powerful bond that is especially evident on Tumblr. The interactions with these texts range from the simple use of reaction

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Savage. "It Gets Better Project | Give Hope to LGBT Youth." *It Gets Better*. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.

gifs to novella length fan fiction stories and even impassioned testimonies regarding the strength that these characters have given viewers to overcome their own unique circumstances.

Kurt stands apart from Santana, Emily, and Paige, primarily because when we are introduced to Kurt, he is already comfortable with his sexual identity—it is those around him who are not. Additionally, Kurt’s flamboyance and very visible difference allows him to take on a role that embodies the differences and eccentricities we all demonstrated, and were harassed for in high school. Kurt is the gay everyman in *Glee*. Kurt’s ability to appeal to the differences within all of us, and not just with the gay community, allowed him to develop into an incredibly lovable and championed character that taught viewers young and old, straight and queer alike that despite the bullying you may face, embracing yourself and your differences and being one-of-a-kind is the most honorable thing you can do. The most indicative scene of this is in the first season, when as the new member of the McKinley High football team, Kurt helps the team to its first win by teaching everyone how to dance to Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies.” Once again embracing his difference and his flamboyance, the qualities that the football team had bullied him for, and turned them into winning assets. Kurt has continued to represent strength in the face of overwhelmingly discriminatory adversity that has come in the form of bullying in high school to gay bashing on the streets of New York. But through it all his strength has resonated in fans who find strength from Kurt and in turn want to give him strength as demonstrated by one fan’s “Gleek confession:”

Im sick and tired of Kurt failing at everything. He's been knocked down so many times and while I appreciate his strength to keep moving on, I just want him to be happy for once. To have a successful career and a peaceful relationship with Blaine.<sup>53</sup>

Santana and Emily have created their own cultish followings on Tumblr. While the two characters have radically different personalities (Santana is an American cheerleader, Emily is a British outsider) they are similar in the way in which they stay loyal to their love. They are unashamed and not afraid to fight for what and who they love even when they realize it is "different" and that being gay is subject to bullying. But in the same way that Kurt's courage for his difference has inspired viewers to embrace their own differences, Santana and Emily demonstrate the importance of loving yourself and trusting that even when you reveal yourself to others you will still be loved. Both characters go through an emotional coming out and coming to terms with their emotions and sexuality that is indicative of a stage in life that many queer teenagers have to go through, the moment in which they realize and can say to themselves "I am gay." Santana and Emily go through a confusing, emotional, and rejection-filled coming out process on screen with both their families, friends and significant others. The extensive exploration of both characters' coming out experiences is incredibly important because it demonstrates to audiences (who are experiencing or have experienced the same process) that they are not

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<sup>53</sup> "Glee Confessions." Web log post. *Gleeks and their Confessions*. 3 Apr. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.



alone, and will rise out of this difficult time just as gloriously as both Santana and Emily have.

But these teen narratives do not just affect teenagers; they also resonate deeply with many adults who had to come to terms with their identity in a time where readily visible representations of themselves were not available as a reassurance. *Pretty Little Liars*' Paige is an example of this trans-generational influence. Paige McCullers is by far the most realistically flawed character on the ABC Family hit show *Pretty Little Liars*. Paige's character has gone through many emotional stages in discovering who she really is and what she really wants. When we are first introduced to her, Paige is the hyper-competitive and aggressive swim teammate of Emily Fields. In a fit of confusion-fueled rage about her feelings, Paige attempts to drown Emily, only to reveal that it was because she was in love with Emily. From there Paige grows: she grows into her feelings and stops using rage and self harm as an attempt to explain them, and eventually she accepts herself she falls in love with Emily and has continued to do everything in her power to protect the woman that she loves.

Paige grew from a dark place of self harm and confusion into a strong and honorable woman who has presented audiences with a representation of overcoming confusion that is so truthful and so indicative many queer youth, including myself, face and have faced. After Ellen senior editor, Heather Hogan, wrote an especially passionate recap of the *Pretty Little Liars* episode "Unbridled," about how the character arc and decisions of

Paige McCullers resonated so deeply, and in a sense validated all of the emotions she felt as a teenager:

The only TV character I have ever seen in all my life who has tripped and fallen and bullied and been bullied and bled and wept and won and won and broken and healed as much as me is Paige McCullers. And if this is it for her, if we never see her again, I just want you to know that I won. In my life, I won. I know its not the same as seeing it on TV, but lock this in your pocket and take it in the grave: I was 16-year-old Paige McCullers. I wrote a letter. I smashed some trash cans. I cut my self open on my own sword and bled all over everyone I ever loved. I failed and failed and failed and failed. And then I won.<sup>54</sup>

Hogan perfectly encapsulates the power of quality representation, her lack of it when she was growing up attributed to the uncertainty and confusion of her identity, but the presence of it today allows her to think back and understand those feelings of confusion and uncertainty, and more importantly it gives teenagers facing the same confusion a place of reassurance. Even though Hogan was not a teenager when this episode aired, her deep connection with Paige allowed her to come to a kind of terms with the emotional roller-coaster when she was 16, and unknowingly in love with her best friend.

Engagement of straight viewers with these narratives is also directly impacted by the visibility and quality of such visibility of queer characters. Representations of “othered” individuals connect us to the narratives of people we would not have otherwise ex-

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<sup>54</sup>Heather Hogan. "'Pretty Little Liars' Recap (4.23): Nice Day for a Red Wedding." *After Ellen*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2014. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.

perienced. Narrative can open otherwise closed minds: “by allowing us to share in the lives of others, entertainment can excited and educate us, can make us imagine, think and feel in ways we may not otherwise have a chance to experience. We expand our emotional and mental lives beyond the scope of our personal experience.”<sup>55</sup> As an audience, we can be transported to the sands of Tatoonine where we can experience a different kind of slavery and we can also be sent to Harlem, to spend an hour living alongside a poverty stricken pregnant young black woman, trying to overcome her circumstances. Narrative film and television help “heterosexuals make sense of gay marriage,”<sup>56</sup> and other queer issues by connecting what is known to what is unknown. We are connected with what we do not know through narrative film, and it allows us to understand in a profoundly emotional manner that breaks down the walls of ignorance that surround us and define discriminatory social practices.

The strength of these narratives helps to personify otherwise distant social issues, adding complexity and a human dimension to concerns that should not be thought of in black and white. The increasing visibility of these marginalized characters in a manner that does not hinge on their stereotypes or uninformed preconceptions helps to change the perception of the queer community in real life, which moves towards initiating social change.

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<sup>55</sup> Cohen, 183.

<sup>56</sup> Emily Kazyak. "Same-Sex Marriage in a Welcoming World: Rights Consciousness of Heterosexuals in Liberal Religious Institutions." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 8.3 (2011): 193. Print.

Narrative film and television have not just affected young viewers, queer viewers, or isolated Midwesterners. The wide-reaching appeal of entertainment and high visibility has allowed these narratives and queer characters to have an impact on Vice President Joe Biden, as well as on President Barack Obama. So much of an impact, in fact, that these representations have helped change the minds of America's leaders to pursue public policies that eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation and protect individuals regardless of their identities. In 2012, Joe Biden went on "Meet the Press" to voice his position in favor of queer rights and same sex marriage by citing the television show *Will & Grace*.

I think 'Will and Grace' probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody's ever done so far. And I think — people fear that which is different. Now they're beginning to understand.<sup>57</sup>

A few days after Biden's remarks President Barack Obama publicly and definitively came out in favor of same-sex marriage<sup>58</sup>. Both Biden and Obama demonstrate the power of visibility and representation of opinions towards marginalized communities and individuals. Biden continued on to remark that he thinks "that the good news is that...more and more Americans [have] come to understand what this is all about is all about is a simple

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<sup>57</sup> David Gregory, and Joe Biden. "Meet the Press: May 6, 2012." *Meet the Press*. NBC. 6 May 2012. Television.

<sup>58</sup> Jackie Calmes, and Peter Baker. "Obama Says Same-Sex Marriage Should Be Legal." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 09 May 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

proposition: Who do you love?"<sup>59</sup> The humanizing factor that a quality television show like *Will and Grace* gives to the queer community has gone a long way to inspiring shifts in attitudes that are as far reaching as to change the opinions and the priorities of two of the most powerful policymakers in the world.

The power of identification holds even more importance in the public policy sphere. The personal connection that viewers have formed with characters goes a long way to changing social attitudes towards queer issues and inciting social change against discriminatory policies. By allowing the "other" to become familiar both visually and emotionally, narrative film and television are able to highlight the effects of social and policy discrimination on this "othered" community.<sup>60</sup> While much of the influence that representation and identification have had on social change is difficult to accurately pinpoint, it is still prevalent. *Boys Don't Cry* and its influence on the Matthew Shepard Act is an example of the power that narrative film and television representations can have in public policies. The exposure that *Boys Don't Cry*'s success brought to hate crimes occurring against the queer community directly translated to a movement for a change in public policy that protects individuals against these crimes.

*Boys Don't Cry* premiered six years after Brandon Teena was killed, and one year after the brutal murder of young Wyoming native, Matthew Shepard. The timing and success of *Boys Don't Cry* was incredibly helpful for pushing the Matthew Shepard Hate

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<sup>59</sup>Seth Abramovitch. "Joe Biden Cites 'Will & Grace' in Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage (Video)." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 6 May 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Frost and Ouellette, 151-61.

Crimes Act to the forefront of the public mind and in emphasizing its importance as an issue worthy of public debate. By humanizing Brandon Teena, *Boys Don't Cry* brought queer hate crimes into the public mind, and the timely murder of Matthew Shepard made Americans realize that hate crimes against queer individuals were not just a singular occurrence that was illustrated by *Boys Don't Cry*. Three years after Matthew's murder, a play entitled *The Laramie Project* premiered on HBO. *The Laramie Project* was a play-turned-television-movie that told the story of Matthew Shepard and his murder from the transcripts of interviews with over 200 people that knew and were affected by the tragedy. Following in the path of *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Laramie Project* used the wide reaching and emotional influence of narrative film to tell the story of Matthew Shepard. Much like Kimberly Pierce did with *Boys Don't Cry*, director Moises Kaufman used *The Laramie Project* as a way to answer the simple question "How do you reach a[n area] full of hostility?"<sup>61</sup> The way in which *The Laramie Project* used real interviews to demonstrate how much of an impact Matthew Shepard's death had on individuals regardless of their sexual orientation and immediate relationship to Matthew. Not only did *The Laramie Project* tell Matthew's story, it told Matthew's story in the context of a community, showing audiences why Matthew's story mattered and why fighting for hate crime protection is important.

The visibility and awareness that *Boys Don't Cry* and its filmmakers brought to the support of the Matthew Shepard campaign for comprehensive hate crime legislation was

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<sup>61</sup> *The Laramie Project*. Dir. Moises Kaufman. By Moises Kaufman. Perf. Laura Linney, Peter Fonda, Nestor Carbonell and Jeremy Davies. Home Box Office Films, 2002. DVD.

monumentally helpful. The film made (and continues to make) Americans *care* about the issue. Kimberly Pierce has continued to use her influence as a filmmaker and creator of *Boys Don't Cry* to fight for hate crimes legislation and in honor of Matthew Shepard by recently introducing the documentary *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine* at its premiere, preventing it from falling to the sidelines as just an issue of a “deviant” and “othered” community. In her introduction of the film, Pierce highlights the important informative power of film, recalling the day she heard about Matthew’s death on the set of *Boys Don't Cry*. The news reinvigorated Pierce and the crew who continued production with the hope “that telling a story such as this [Brandon’s] would inform people and wake them up.”<sup>62</sup> While the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Act took almost a decade to be finally signed into law, the momentum that *Boys Don't Cry* and HBO’s *The Laramie Project* gave it were instrumental in keeping the legislation alive and well-supported as it trudged through Congress and eventually became a law.

But the signing of the comprehensive Matthew Shepard and James E. Byrd Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act in 2009 did not mark the only influence of narrative film and television on American public policy. Since the 90’s the queer community has faced discrimination in the form of marriage restrictions. The past two presidencies have seen a rise in extremely partisan attitudes towards same-sex marriage and a general disapproval of the queer community.<sup>63</sup> LGBTQ rights have become the civil rights issue of this generation,

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<sup>62</sup> *Kimberly Peirce Speaks about Learning of the Death of Matthew Shepard*. Perf. Kimberly Peirce. Facing History and Ourselves, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> "Gay and Lesbian Rights." *Gallup.Com*. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

and at the forefront of this fight has been the core idea of acceptance, not just tolerance. The exposure to realistic, relatable, and dynamic representations of queer individuals and their stories that narrative film and television offer viewers has made an important step forward for the acceptance of the queer community. Not only has representation on-screen influenced a comfort with identity for both queer individuals and their straight peers, it has also inspired a new way of looking at the world, and more importantly a community of people who have suffered from intolerance for too long. This inspiration, while hard to quantify, is evident in the exposure and sympathy it brought to Matthew Shepard's tragic death, and the Shepard family's crusade government protection for hate crimes. Most recently, it is evident in the way that our political leaders are changing their attitudes towards offering protection and equality to queer and straight individuals alike.

There is still so much more progress to be made, so much more to be done in order for queer teenagers to not feel "consumed by loneliness, feelings of not belonging, and thinking of ways to kill [themselves]."<sup>64</sup> There is still so much to be done in the form of representation to create equality amongst characters on screen that mirror the kind of equality that we desire in real life. In the age of mass media, where almost every individual on the face of Earth has the ability to access the images and narratives that film and television provide, representation continues to play an increasingly important role. In the United States, queer individuals suffer from epidemic-sized numbers of homeless youth, appalling instances of "gay bashing," and wide-reaching perceptions of social intoler-

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Carosone. "Yes, Suicide Is a Gay Issue." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 25 Sept. 2013. Web. 19 Apr. 2014.



ance. Thankfully, due to the increased visibility of queer characters with whom audiences can connect on popular and entertaining televisions shows and films, social intolerance is decreasing, “gay bashing” has lessened, and more attention is being paid to queer youth. However, in developing countries queer communities are faced with much more severe social and political injustice. In some countries in Africa, homosexuality is punishable by death,<sup>65</sup> India definitively ruled that homosexuality is illegal,<sup>66</sup> and just in the past year Vladimir Putin instated a series of laws in Russia that enforced government sanctioned discrimination against the queer community.<sup>67</sup>

While the state of acceptance for queer individuals around the world is disheartening, narratives in film and television offer the unique ability for lessons and stories of hope and courage to transcend the horrible reality that queer individuals must live through. Just like these narratives have allowed American viewers to discover themselves and to be comfortable with those who are different, they do the same for viewers around the world. The US Embassy has even begun using film to promote tolerance in Jamaica, by recently holding a screening of *The Laramie Project* as a part of the Erase Hate event in Kingston.<sup>68</sup> And domestically, the television scene is witnessing a continual emergence

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<sup>65</sup> Faith Karimi, and Nick Thompson. "Uganda's President Museveni Signs Controversial Anti-gay Bill into Law." CNN. Cable News Network, 25 Feb. 2014. Web. 17 Apr. 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Ash Kotak. "India's Transgender Law Is No Help to Its Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Communities." Theguardian.com. Guardian News and Media, 17 Apr. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Grekov. "Russia's Anti-Gay Law, Spelled Out in Plain English." PolicyMic. 8 Aug. 2013. Web. 17 Apr. 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Marcia Rowe. "US Embassy Promotes Tolerance through 'The Laramie Project'" *Jamaica Gleaner Entertainment RSS*. 14 Apr. 2014. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.

of quality representations of queer characters that are directed at both teen and old viewers alike.

Last year on the breakout Netflix hit show *Orange is the New Black*, the world was introduced to Sophia, a trans woman portrayed with incredible truth and conviction by trans actor and activist Laverne Cox. Laverne has since used the success of the show as a platform to advocate for transgender rights and promote awareness and acceptance for the community. At the end of April this year, MTV will be premiering a new high school comedy called *Faking It*. The show takes place at a very gay-friendly high school, and follows best friends Karma and Amy who are mistaken as a lesbian couple. As a lesbian couple, Karma and Amy sky rocket to popularity and decide to continue “faking it,” until Amy realizes her feelings for Karma are real. The show is a refreshing look at a world in which being gay is not only ok, it is encouraged, and it is even a gateway to popularity! Much like how *Glee* gave awkward teenagers a space in which they could learn to be themselves, *Faking It* is poised to give alienated queer high-schoolers, and the teens that alienated them, a space to learn to accept everyone. ABC Family’s *Pretty Little Liars* continues to give viewers an enduring and endearing relationship between Emily and Paige, one that also explores the growth of two characters who are coming to terms with their own identities while balancing their extraordinary emotions for each other.

The relationship between the representation of queer characters and the expansion of US human rights laws is by no means a cause and effect, nevertheless representation has an undoubtedly profound influence on policy change. Every month, more and more

states are recognizing the right to love whoever you want to love. The increased visibility, acceptance, and popularity of queer characters on screen has helped influence the acceptance of queer individuals in real life, creating a society that is not only becoming more tolerant, but also more aware and accepting of those that are different. But, more importantly, these characters have created a world where 16 year-olds in rural California can find safety and understanding on screen, a world where young adults can see that they no longer have to be afraid of difference. A world where I found the strength to come out to myself because Ashley, Spencer, Kalinda, Callie, Arizona, Brandon, and Paige showed me the beauty of embracing and loving yourself. And a world where my children, and their children, can fearlessly grow up loving whoever they want to love, free to be themselves, where it does not matter if they're "half monkey or half ape"<sup>69</sup>, they will be accepted.

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<sup>69</sup> *Boys Don't Cry*, Pierce and Bienen.

## Appendix

In addition to the films and television shows I have discussed, here are some additional narratives that maintain meaningful representation of queer characters. They range from comedy to drama and everything in between, but consistently represent the queer community in a dynamic and realistic manner. This is by no means a comprehensive list of films and television shows that feature queer characters, but rather a selection of works with prominent characters that have wide reaching influence in popular culture, have attained critical acclaim, and are (in my opinion) wildly entertaining.

### Television:

*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (FOX; 2013)

*Dawson's Creek* (WB; 1998-2003)

*Degrassi: The Next Generation* (The N; 2001-)

*Faking It* (MTV; 2014-)

*Happy Endings* (ABC; 2011-2013)

*Lost Girl* (SyFy; 2010-)

*Modern Family* (ABC; 2009-)

*Orange is the New Black* (Netflix; 2013-)

*Orphan Black* (BBC America; 2013-)

*Revenge* (ABC; 2011-)

*Scandal* (ABC; 2011-)

*Shameless* (Showtime; 2011-)

*Skins UK* (E4; 2007-2013)

*Teen Wolf* (MTV; 2011-)

*Ugly Betty* (ABC; 2006-2010)

Film:

*Appropriate Behavior* (2014)

Dir. Desiree Akhavan

*Bound* (1996)

Dir. The Wachowski Brothers

*Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

Dir. Ang Lee

*Circumstance* (2011)

Dir. Maryam Keshavarz

*Concussion* (2013)

Dir. Stacie Passon

*Imagine Me & You* (2005)

Dir. Ol Parker

*Interior:Leather Bar.* (2013)

Dir. James Franco

*Kyss Mig* (2011)

Dir. Alexandra-Therese Keining

*Lost and Delirious* (2001)

Dir. Léa Pool

*Milk* (2008)

Dir. Gus Van Sant

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