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THE REPRESENTATIONS OF GAY WOMEN ON TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

The representations of gay women on television, however fictional, have the power to influence and shape our real-world ideas, expectations, and opinions in significant ways. Due to the relatively low number of gay female characters on television, these characters must represent an entire population in a way that straight characters do not, which is very problematic. This thesis discusses and analyzes various patterns I have observed, including “lesbians” dating men, lesbian femininity, and tragic lesbian love, in popular television shows such as *Roseanne, All My Children, Ellen, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Grey’s Anatomy, Glee,* and *Pretty Little Liars*. It also acknowledges representations of gay women that are positive and redeeming, and suggests strategies and solutions for how these representations could be improved upon in the future.

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Introduction

A representation is, on the most basic level, something that represents something else. It is an image, a likeness, a depiction – it is not the real thing. Though this assertion may seem obvious, perhaps even too obvious to warrant an explanation, in our lived experience, the line between the representation and the real can become quite blurred. In fact, sometimes the line is, at best, a dotted line that enables aspects of both to bleed into the next in a way that allows for ideas about the image to influence ideas about the real. Understandably, as many scholars of popular culture argue, this type of influence is problematic.

Unfortunately, this is often what happens when it comes to the representations of gay women on television, which are imbued with even more meaning due to their relatively low number. To draw a contrast, consider Joey (Matt LeBlanc) from *Friends*, a straight man. While the character Joey is a representation in the sense that he is an image of a straight man and not a real-life straight man, it would be untrue to say that he is representing the entire population of straight men. Since there are *so* many images of straight men on television, it would be illogical to claim that we could get an idea of the real-life population from studying these representations. We may get an image of a particular sort of straight man based on Joey's race, class, and other demographic information, but there are simply too many images of straight men for Joey to become a powerful force of heterosexual male representation – the images are too diverse and variable to be collapsed into a single supposedly representative character. Similarly, straight women enjoy a wide variety of representations, as well.

In the case of gay female characters, there are far fewer to examine. (Characters representing all other LGBT identities are equally as scarce, as the following statistics show, but this thesis, in order to maximize depth of analysis, focuses solely on lesbian representations.)

According to GLAAD (formerly known as Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), in 2013, ABC and FOX had the highest percentage of LGBT characters at 5.4 percent each. The CW had 3 percent, CBS had 1.9 percent, and NBC had the least with 1 percent. GLAAD also reports that, of the 46 regular and recurring LGBT characters on broadcast networks, half are women, meaning that only 2.7 percent, 1.5 percent, 0.95 percent, and 0.5 percent of these networks' characters are lesbians, respectively (France). This could be, in part, due to what has been termed double or multiple discrimination, which describes the unique experience of a group or individual who has two or more oppressed identities. This thesis, though, is less about why there are so few representations and more about analyzing the representations that we do have. While the lived experiences of gay women are just as diverse, complicated, and complex as those of any other group, the images we see on television suggest a slightly different story, and they assume additional meaning given their rarity. Unlike straight male characters such as Joey, there are so few gay female characters and such a limited range of representations working to shape the public imagination that we can analyze and evaluate noticeable patterns.

This thesis focuses on the medium of television and does not discuss film representations at length. Though film does, of course, feature many lesbian characters, because this thesis is primarily about how fictional characters influence real-world perceptions, television as the more accessible viewing medium (according to Nielsen, 96.7 percent of American households owned television sets in 2011) made more sense for this project (Stelter). Moreover, I limited my analysis to television shows that are/were featured on broadcast network channels such as ABC, NBC, and FOX, which can be accessed without any kind of paid subscription. One show, *Pretty Little Liars*, airs on the cable network channel ABC Family, but as this channel is received in 84.47 percent of households according to Nielsen, and is affiliated with ABC, it is still part of what the large majority of Americans are able to watch (Seidman).

The specific shows analyzed include *All My Children*, *HeartBeat*, *Roseanne*, *Ellen*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The O.C.*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Glee*, and *Pretty Little Liars*. Each show features at least one lesbian character that can be classified as regular or recurring, and each show is quite influential in its own right. Some, like *Friends*, enjoy immense popularity that lasts long after the series has ended. Others, like *Buffy*, are cult classics that impact the lives of devoted fans on deep levels. And still others, like *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars*, have captured the attention of today's youth in a way that makes their representations of gay women culturally powerful.

Because with television shows, as with anything else, historical context matters, what was shocking and groundbreaking on *Ellen* in the 90s might seem tame on *Glee* today. This does not mean, though, that we should disregard or in any way look down upon what has come before; the representations of the past have laid the foundation for those of the present. And by comparing and contrasting these representations, we can see which social and psychological lines have been crossed, which have been blurred, and which we are still afraid to approach. The lesbian representations that this thesis addresses date from 1983 to the present, and their start/end dates and overlaps can be seen in Table 1. Table 1 also includes significant milestones in the history of lesbians on television, such as the first lesbian kiss on daytime and the first lesbian weddings.

Before delving into the analyses, I would like to take a moment to address my use and understanding of the terms "lesbian" and "gay woman." Usually, "lesbian" calls to mind a woman's sole attraction to other women, and it is distinct from identities such as bisexual, pansexual, and the like. "Gay woman" often carries the same meaning, although some may use it as more of an umbrella term, thus allowing for these other non-exclusive identities. In this thesis, I favor the more exclusive definition of "gay woman," and as such, I use this term interchangeably with "lesbian." Of course, "words come trailing clouds of connotation that are very hard to shake off," labels are slippery, and identities are potentially fluid (Dyer 8). These are

Table 1. Lesbian Representations Timeline

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>1980 | | | | 85 | | | | 90 | | | | 95 | | | | 00 | | | | 05 | | | | 10 | | | | 2015</th></tr>
<tr><td>All My Children</td><td>1 ------4-----------5------ -</td></tr>
<tr><td>HeartBeat</td><td>2-</td></tr>
<tr><td>Roseanne</td><td>-------------------</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ellen</td><td>---------</td></tr>
<tr><td>Friends</td><td>----3-----------</td></tr>
<tr><td>Buffy</td><td>--------------</td></tr>
<tr><td>The O.C.</td><td>-------</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grey's Anatomy</td><td>---------------------→</td></tr>
<tr><td>Glee</td><td>------------→</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pretty Little Liars</td><td>---------→</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">1: Dr. Lynn Carson is first lesbian character on daytime television
2: Marilyn McGrath is first regular lesbian character on primetime
3: First lesbian wedding on primetime
4: First lesbian kiss on daytime (first “lesbian” kiss on primetime was on L. A. Law in 1991 between a bisexual woman and a heterosexual woman)
5: First lesbian wedding on daytime</td></tr>
</table>

not facts that I shy away from or ignore, as Chapter 1 shows with its exploration of “lesbians” dating men before and/or after dating women. This chapter begins by analyzing those lesbians whose sexual experiences with men ultimately end with their adoption of an exclusive lesbian identity, and then turns to consider lesbians whose experiences with men and women are bit more complex and thus resist exclusive labels. Chapter 2 addresses the abundance of feminine lesbians on TV, and pays particular attention to the tendency of tomboyish women to become more feminine once they come out. Chapter 3 examines the theme of tragic lesbian love, which seems to plague a disproportionately large amount of lesbian relationships on television. Chapter 4 recognizes those lesbian representations that send positive messages about the lesbian community to viewing audiences, and finally, Chapter 5 explores ways that we can improve the representations of lesbians in the future.

Chapter 1

"Lesbians" Dating Men

"There is no gray area here…. You can't kind of be a lesbian."

– Grey's Anatomy

Lesbians, contrary to the stereotypical and once culturally popular idea that they are "man haters," interact with men on a regular basis. They work with them, live with them (whether a roommate or a relative), and often spend their free time with them. In the case of many lesbians on television, they may also date, become sexually involved with, and even marry these men. In fact, out of the ten shows I analyzed, *nine* featured lesbians who were involved with men at one time or another (the tenth show, *HeartBeat*, might have, but given its age, footage of this show was almost impossible to find). Were the programs each focused on or produced within a particular historical phase of gay representation, the initial public emergence of such images, for example, perhaps such heterosexual relationships would be the background for a coming-out story. The straight relationships would be a way to explain, at the level of the characters, a psychological and emotional process of development whereby a woman would struggle to come to terms with her gayness, and would be a way to ease the viewing audience toward greater levels of awareness and acceptance. But frequently, this is not the case. While much time has passed and same-sex marriage is now legal in seventeen states, representations of gay women on TV are still limited and often still associated with males. Understandably, this is problematic for real-world lesbians, many of whom could never imagine being in a relationship (or a bed) with a man. Does it imply that all lesbians are actually bisexual, or that they can't make up their minds? Even worse, does it suggest that lesbianism is just a phase? Are man-dating (not hating) lesbians

introduced into television so that men watching at home can feel somewhat included, or at least feel that they have a chance to be included if the mood strikes?

Introducing the Dating Paradigm: The Lesbian Who Never Looks Back

Many lesbians might say that they "realized" they were gay. After making sense of their feelings for other women or having a life-changing experience, they "discover" their same-sex feelings which, in hindsight, may have always been there, lingering but misunderstood, suppressed, or outright rejected. In these situations, lesbians might date men before the big discovery, either in order to fit in or because they thought they were supposed to. (Girls often hope for a Prince Charming, after all, based on early childhood development and stories. How are they supposed to know that Princess Charming is a viable option?) These opposite-sex relationships can experience varying degrees of success. For some, they may find that they fell in love with the men they dated; after falling in love with a woman, they may or may no longer define the opposite-sex attraction as love. For others, a nagging feeling that something is just slightly "off" may accompany the entire relationship, though the source of this "offness" may be difficult to pinpoint. In any case, dating men early on is relatively common among women who later self-define as exclusive lesbians. On *Ellen*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Glee*, and *Pretty Little Liars*, we see these exact scenarios. What is disturbing, though, is the regularity of them, that is, their consistency over time. While early representations may have had to conduct social, historical, and psychological work with audiences in order to make the representation of same-sex desire acceptable, decades have gone by since those first representations. But lesbians on TV are still dating men.

Ellen, also known as *These Friends of Mine* in its first season, premiered in March 1994 on ABC. Starring Ellen DeGeneres as the titular character, this situational comedy highlighted the

hilarious (though often unfortunate) events of Ellen Morgan's life, including relationship mishaps, work troubles, and friend quarrels. In the pilot episode, which centers on Ellen's inability to take a decent driver's license photo, viewers are not given any indication of her relationship status or her sexual orientation. Two episodes later in "A Kiss Is Still a Kiss," the audience is clued in – Ellen and her friends answer personal ads, and Ellen lands a date with a man named Jackson (Tony Carreiro). On the date, she seems interested in Jackson, and appears to be genuinely enjoying herself. Afterwards, she boasts to her friends that he's "perfect." Later in the episode, Ellen and "Mr. Perfect" share a steamy kiss, leaving Ellen distraught. She is not upset about kissing a man, though, as many contemporary viewers may guess based on their knowledge of the flesh-and-blood Ellen DeGeneres; she is bothered that he isn't a better kisser. Ellen Morgan is, as far as we can tell, exclusively heterosexual.

In the next episode, "The Class Reunion," Ellen's friends discuss her former high school crush, Joe (Steven Flynn). Of course, as fate (and sitcoms) would have it, Ellen runs into Joe at her class reunion. Soon, the two share an intimate kiss, and Ellen is visibly into both the kiss and the person she is kissing. In the eleventh episode of the first season, "The Boyfriend Stealer," when Ellen is complaining about how touchy-feely her friend's boyfriend has been with her, she says she has "been in bed with men who haven't touched [her] that much." This, taken together with her high school crush, provide evidence of Ellen's clearly heterosexual history and subjectivity.

Throughout the second season, Ellen dates (or tries to date) a variety of men, including her dentist, a professor, and a customer at the bookstore where she works. This customer, Dan (William Ragsdale), actually becomes a love interest for Ellen, and at the end of the second season, the two are shown kissing passionately. Later, Ellen emerges from the bedroom wearing a robe, smoking an invisible cigarette, and dancing around – it is clear that she and Dan had sex the

night before. Dan comes out of the bedroom moments later, and the two, very affectionate with each other, profess that they are falling in love.

At the beginning of the third season, however, Dan is nowhere to be found. Rather, issues with Ellen's family and the bookstore feature prominently, leaving little room for her love life. This hiatus from romance paves the way for the fourth and easily most important season of the series, though, which has enough excitement to make up for the dry spell of the third. Throughout this season, quite a few hints drop about Ellen's sexuality. In "Splitsville, Man," the third episode of the season, Ellen's realtor loses track of her when they are touring a house. The realtor walks around calling Ellen's name, and Ellen – much to the delight of the studio audience – literally comes out of the closet to greet her. Later in this episode, when talking to her parents about their impending divorce, she says, "What if I said something shocking to you? Like my whole life has been a lie and I'm really… left-handed?" These hints at Ellen's open secret, so to speak, only increase as the fourth season progresses. She finally comes out in the two-part "Puppy Episode," which was near the end of this season.

In the second part of this now-famed episode, Ellen admits to her friend that she is in love with Susan (Laura Dern), a coworker of the man Ellen was dating. Unfortunately for Ellen, Susan is in a long-term relationship with another woman, and the relationship ends before it has a chance to begin. It is in the fifth (and final) season of the series that Ellen becomes more involved in the gay community. Her ex-boyfriend Dan appears in the first episode of this season, and the two have a moment and share a kiss. It goes no further than that, though, and a few episodes later, Ellen manages to (finally) find Laurie (Lisa Darr), a single lesbian. Ellen and Laurie stay together until the last episode of the series, but much more of their relationship happens off screen than it does on. Their supposedly successful life together is thus more imagined than it is depicted, and when they are together, they are much less sexual and affectionate with one another than Ellen was with Dan, for example. We do get to see the warmth of their relationship in the program's

final moments, when the two of them place fake wedding rings on each other's hands, say "I do," kiss, and smash cake in each other's faces. This scene serves to confirm Ellen's lesbian identity, and we have every reason to believe that her relationship with Laurie experiences success after the screen fades to black.

The extremely popular television show *Friends*, premiering just months after *Ellen* in 1994, presents a unique case when it comes to lesbians dating men. Like Ellen Morgan, when it comes to the character of Carol (Anita Barone appeared for the character's debut episode, but Carol was played by Jane Sibbett thereafter), we have evidence of a heterosexual past. Unlike Ellen, though, that is *all* that we have – we do not see Carol in any heterosexual pairings during the show's ten-season run. This does not mean, however, that her heterosexual past is any less telling. In the first episode of *Friends*, we learn through the casual conversation of the six main characters that Carol left Ross (David Schwimmer) after she realized she was a lesbian. The two were married, indicating that Carol had (or at least thought she had) strong enough feelings for a man to make such a commitment to him.

We see Carol and her partner Susan (Jessica Hecht) for the first time in the second episode of the series, "The One with the Sonogram at the End." Carol has a doctor's appointment to check on the baby she produced with Ross before their separation, which Ross, Carol, and Susan have decided to all care for. We see the triangular relationship that has had to form between them, and it is tense, to say the very least. And though Carol was in a heterosexual relationship with Ross before, all three of them refer to Carol's lesbianism as if it were inherent and everlasting. This fact is reinforced in "The One That Could Have Been," an episode in the show's sixth season. Even in this "what if" episode, Carol is not interested solely in Ross. She jumps on the chance to have a threesome with another woman (Susan), and the two exclude Ross from the encounter completely. When Ross complains about the threesome being more of a

twosome, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) tells him that Carol is gay. Even in this entirely hypothetical world, Carol's sexual orientation stays the same.

In the early seasons of *Friends*, Ross is often seen trying to rekindle things with Carol, testing to see if her sexual orientation can be changed back, gotten over, or somehow moved beyond as if he can reverse the emotional shift that guided her away from him and toward a woman in the first place. When he is not trying to do that, he is almost certainly acting in a way that shows how threatened he is by Susan. Though Carol shuts Ross down repeatedly, in the middle of the first season, he gets through to her, even if only for a moment. In "The One with the Candy Hearts," Ross and Carol end up at the same restaurant with their Valentine's Day dates. After the restaurant clears out, the two of them sit talking, with Ross relentlessly trying to persuade Carol to give their relationship another try. Carol protests, but after Ross says he loves her, they kiss. Carol tells Ross that she loves him, too, but reminds him that she is a lesbian. I believe that their kiss, though loaded with emotion, did not come from a sexual, or even a romantic place. Ross and Carol, as ex-spouses and parents of their son, care about each other immensely. And a kiss between a heterosexual man and a gay woman will not bring about that woman's "switch" or "conversion" to heterosexuality, as Carol is quick to remind Ross. We last see Carol and Susan in the sixth season, but we can assume that their relationship lasts, with both women continuing to identify as lesbian. While most of the lesbian relationship exists off screen, saving the viewing public from seeing the same-sex romance and day-to-day existence associated with living a life together, the program largely remains within the pattern set up by *Ellen* whereby lesbians are likeable, relatively non-sexual, often parents, and are often not taking center stage as a couple during the weekly installments of the programs.

Unlike the adult characters of Ellen and Carol, Willow (Alyson Hannigan), easily the most lovable character on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which premiered in 1997, is a teenager. In the very first episode, she reveals to Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) that she is awkward around

guys, and it is not until she meets Oz (Seth Green), a werewolf, in the second season that we see her dating a boy. Willow and Oz have a very affectionate relationship, and can often be seen cuddling and kissing on campus. Oz is not the only man that Willow finds herself attracted to, though, for in the season three episode “Homecoming,” Willow has an intimate moment with her best friend, Xander (Nicholas Bredon). They share a heartfelt kiss, despite both of them being in committed relationships. And though the two noticeably have feelings for one another, nothing further comes of this kiss.

At the end of the third season, Willow’s emotional growth continues, and she and Oz have sex for the first time. Afterwards, Willow comments that she feels “different” and that the experience was “nice” (“Graduation Day: Part 1”). The two of them, cuddling naked under the covers, are clearly happy. They remain together until the beginning of the fourth season, when Oz, after realizing that he literally cannot control the wolf inside him and poses a risk to her, decides that it would be best for both of them if he left town.

Four episodes later, in “Hush,” Willow grows closer to Tara (Amber Benson), another girl in her Wicca group in college. The two connect over witchcraft, and when running from a demon, they must hold hands to intensify the power of a spell. After the spell’s success, the two look at each other intently and, while still holding hands, seem to have a moment. Over the next few episodes, they spend more and more time together, often practicing witchcraft. The romantic relationship between Willow and Tara develops gradually, but with the help of witchcraft (which, according to many of the characters on *Buffy*, is loaded with sexual energy) and under the spell of danger within a world of unbelievable creatures, their encounters are often very intense and emotionally charged. In the season four episode “Who Are You,” for example, Willow and Tara conduct a dangerous ritual that leaves Willow breathing hard, arching her back, and moaning on the floor.

Late in the fourth season, in “New Moon Rising,” Oz returns as a new man with his werewolf tendencies under control. And though Willow admits to Buffy that she “felt everything coming back” when she was with Oz, she tells Oz that she is happy with Tara, and effectively chooses her over Oz. At the end of the episode, Willow visits Tara, and Tara is fully expecting Willow to have decided to go back to Oz. In what is one of the most touching moments of the series, Tara says, “I understand… you have to be with the person you love.” Willow confidently says that she is.

Willow and Tara have a strong, loving relationship that is admired by all of their friends. They break up for a short time when Tara disapproves of Willow’s overreliance on magic, but they’re unable to stay apart for long. On more than one occasion, Willow comments that she “realized” she was gay as if it were an undiscovered part of her inherent identity, and defines herself as an exclusive lesbian. And after Tara’s untimely death near the end of the sixth season, Willow becomes involved with another girl, Kennedy (Iyari Limon), who she dates until the series finale.

Though Willow never states explicitly that things with Oz were “off,” her behavior and various statements give plenty of reason to believe that, through discovering her sexuality, she discovers her true self. She turns down the chance to enter into a heterosexual relationship when Oz returns, and judging by the final episode, she will likely stay with Kennedy. Certainly, the program moves beyond the paradigm established by *Ellen* or *Friends* by focusing on a teenager, yet Willow remains within a storyline that requires her to be sexually involved with a man.

Three years after *Buffy* ended, the hit medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* introduced viewers to Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez), an orthopedic surgeon at the fictional Seattle Grace Hospital. Like Ellen, Carol, and Willow, Callie is involved with men until she realizes that she is gay, after which she becomes committed to a single woman. But unlike these three other characters, her journey to that point is a bit more complicated, thus allowing viewers to conceptualize sexuality

as more than just a black-and-white matter. In Callie's first episode (the nineteenth of season two), she is flirtatious and forward, and blatantly checks out intern George O'Malley (T. R. Knight). Later in the episode, she writes her phone number on George's hand – clearly, she is interested in him, and she isn't afraid to make the first move. The two have palpable chemistry in the following episodes, and at one point, Callie says to a female intern, "George O'Malley is sweet and kind and smart and strong. And he makes my world stop" ("The Name of the Game"). When it comes to Callie's feelings, there is no guesswork necessary.

In the third season, Callie's heterosexuality is further underscored as she is living with George. After he feels rather suffocated by the situation, she moves out and stays at a hotel. While the two are broken up, Callie sleeps with another man, Mark Sloan (Eric Dane), a fellow doctor at Seattle Grace. Soon, Callie and George make up, and take a spontaneous trip to Las Vegas to get married. As far as we can see, their marriage is good, fun, and close. Near the end of the third season, Callie admits to George that she wants to have a baby. However, before the two can take this step, George has an affair with his best friend and fellow intern Izzie (Katherine Heigl), causing understandable tension between him and Callie. Before long, their marriage ends, leaving a void in Callie's life that Dr. Erica Hahn (Brooke Smith) is quick to fill and marking the beginning of the Sapphic storyline that remains in the program today.

Erica and Callie are fast friends, and often, they are seen discussing the previous night's shenanigans at their favorite bar or coming into the hospital together. These two women, both of whom have strong, dominant personalities, have a unique bond that they avoid commenting upon. Their relationship consists mostly of longing looks here and subtle touches there, until one evening when Callie, Erica, and Mark share an elevator. Callie and Erica tease Mark, who has a sexual past with Callie and a professed attraction to Erica, about the prospect of a threesome. When Erica quips that Mark wouldn't be able to handle Callie and Erica together, he objects,

which prompts Erica to spring a kiss on Callie. "See? Too much for you," Erica says ("Losing My Mind"). Callie is visibly shocked by the lip-lock.

After a little bit of Mark's prodding, Callie gathers the courage to kiss Erica in what marks the beginning of their official relationship. It's a new experience for both of them (though we have not seen Erica date other men, she tells Callie that she is the first woman she's kissed), and both admit that they are "freaking out" about it ("Dream a Little Dream of Me: Part 2"). While Erica seems to enjoy exploring this new territory hand-in-hand with Callie, Callie has a bit of a different approach. Once she and Erica start having sex, Callie turns to Mark for hands-on advice. In not so many words, Callie asks Mark to demonstrate how to perform oral sex on a woman, which he does gladly.

When this problem is "solved," new problems (whether real or imagined) take their place, with Callie ultimately returning to the same solution. She runs – often literally – to Mark for sex, and it seems that she is using these heterosexual encounters to hide from, forget, or fight her same-sex feelings. She begins having sex with Mark frequently (while still dating Erica) to see if she likes sex with men better than sex with women. She eventually comes to the conclusion that the sex is "awesome" with both Mark and Callie, which leads her to settle, however uneasily, on a bisexual identity ("Life During Wartime"). All theories tested and all problems solved, Callie finally calls things off with Mark and chooses to focus her attention entirely on her relationship with Erica. In the next episode, while we ostensibly could have seen the beginning of a renewed, truly committed relationship between Callie and Erica, we see an argument that ends with Erica calling Callie out on only being "kind of" a lesbian ("Rise Up"). It seems that Erica expects Callie to be like Ellen, Carol, and Willow, who, after their respective experiences with women, are able to know, without a shred of doubt, that they are meant to be with women. This view of sexuality as a hardwired, either/or matter disregards the possible range between exclusive straightness and exclusive gayness, and when Erica sees that Callie's sexuality may exist

somewhere in that range, it is too much for her to handle – this episode, the seventh in the fifth season, is Erica's last.

Though Callie is upset by the dissolution of her relationship, before long, a new love interest is introduced for her in the form of Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw), a new pediatric surgeon at the hospital. Arizona, who is later characterized as an experienced and exclusive lesbian, takes no time in getting to know Callie. Upon meeting Callie in the bathroom and comforting her about her break-up, Arizona says, "There will be people lining up for you." When Callie asks for names, Arizona kisses her, says "I think you'll know," and leaves the bathroom ("Beat Your Heart Out"). Their relationship escalates quickly, and soon, the two share kisses at the hospital and intimate moments in the bedroom.

In the sixth season, and perhaps as a result of dating Arizona, Callie becomes much more comfortable with who she is. When her religious, overbearing father (Hector Elizondo) tries to take Callie away from Seattle (and away from Arizona), she chooses to stay with Arizona and risk being financially cut off. In a later episode, when her father brings a priest to the hospital, Callie yells that "you can't pray away the gay," thus publically (and loudly) affirming her identity ("Invasion"). In the beginning of the seventh season, after conflicting opinions about starting a family and Arizona's travel grant to Africa cause serious rifts in their relationship, Arizona and Callie call it quits. They make up by the middle of the season, but while they were apart, Callie slept with Mark. The fact that Callie had sex with a man bothers Arizona, but the two are able to get over their issues and end up marrying by the end of the season.

Arizona and Callie remain together during the ninth season, though their relationship is undeniably rocky due to several tragic and unfortunate events (see Chapter 3). As of this writing, *Grey's* is in the middle of its tenth season, and Callie and Arizona are still together. Thus, the program reaffirms the paradigm seen in *Ellen*, *Friends*, and *Buffy* in which a female character establishes an exclusive lesbian identity after being involved with men. However, Callie's

journey does open up the possibility that sexuality exists along a spectrum, not a binary, and that differentiates *Grey's* from the others in a significant way.

Appearing in 2009, the musical comedy-drama *Glee* premiered on FOX and assumed its position within the historical timeline of televised representations of gayness. Set at the fictional McKinley High, the show focuses on the glee club and features several archetypal high school characters, including jocks, nerds, and cheerleaders. One of the cheerleading crew (also known as the Cheerios) is Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera), a feisty, outspoken, self-declared "bitch" who joins the glee club in the second episode of the series. In the third episode, she is seen making out with Puck (Mark Salling), the bad boy of the school, and she breaks up with him before the episode is over because of his bad credit score. Despite the breakup, the two continue to have a casual sexual relationship well into the show's second season.

While semi-involved with Puck, in the thirteenth episode of the first season, it is revealed that Santana has had sex with Brittany (Heather Morris), a fellow Cheerio. On a group phone call, when denying that she and Puck are together, Santana says that sex is not dating. Brittany then says, "If it were, Santana and I would be dating" ("Sectionals"). This is the first hint that Santana and Brittany might be something other than exclusively heterosexual. Two episodes later, the non-exclusivity is clarified when Santana takes the virginity of Finn (Cory Monteith), the star football player at McKinley and fellow member of the glee club.

Shortly after having sex with Finn, Santana is seen resting her head on Brittany's shoulder as they listen to a song at glee club practice. The two are also often shown linking their pinkies during school. In the episode "Duets" early in the second season, they are lying in bed together as Santana kisses Brittany's neck. Brittany comments on Santana's "sweet lady kisses," and Santana says, "It's a nice break from all that scissoring." After Brittany proposes that they sing a duet for glee club, though, Santana downplays their relationship and says that she is only with Brittany because Puck isn't around. In the middle of this season, Santana finds another

substitute for Puck in the form of Sam (Chord Overstreet), another male glee club member, who she is involved with for two episodes.

In the episode "Sexy," the fifteenth of the season, Santana and Brittany are finally honest with each other about their feelings. They sing "Landslides" by Fleetwood Mac and hug after the emotional performance, but Santana is quick to tell everyone that she doesn't want to be labeled. Later, at Brittany's locker, the two confess that they love each other. Specifically, Santana says that she doesn't want to be with Sam, Finn, or "any of those other guys" in a way that implies that she is only interested in women (or at least only interested in Brittany).

Though Santana realizes that she has same-sex feelings, she is not quite ready for everyone at school to know about them. She and a closeted male football player, Dave (Max Adler), agree to be each other's beards, or human disguises that create the impression of straightness via the creation of a simulated heterosexual relationship. It is not until the third season that Santana is outed by Finn, who loudly tells her in a crowded hallway at school to "just come out of the closet" ("Mash Off"). When she confronts him later and he says that everyone already knew, Santana is basically forced to tell her family about her sexual identity before they hear it from another source. In the conversation with her grandmother, she says, "I love girls the way that I'm supposed to feel about boys. It's just something that's always been inside of me" ("I Kissed a Girl"). According to Santana, her feelings for women are not only exclusive, but are also innate.

Santana and Brittany have a sweet, affectionate relationship that lasts until the fourth season, when their long-distance situation (Santana is now in college) proves to be too difficult to maintain. At the end of this season, Santana has a one-night stand with Quinn (Dianna Agron), an ostensibly heterosexual woman with whom Santana worked with in glee club and in the Cheerios. In the fifth season, which is airing as of this writing, Santana is dating her female coworker Dani

(Demi Lovato). It seems that what Santana told her grandmother is true, that her lesbianism has "always been inside" – and it doesn't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Pretty Little Liars, like *Glee*, is primarily aimed at teen audiences. The show premiered on ABC Family in 2010, and has quickly become one of the most talked about shows among its demographic. Within the first minute of the first episode, the sexuality of one of the main female characters, Emily (Shay Mitchell), is called into question. After she says that she loves Beyoncé's new music video, another one of the girls says, "Maybe a little too much, Em" ("Pilot"). Even though the snarky comment goes unnoticed by everyone else in the group, Emily becomes visibly uncomfortable. Later, Emily becomes attracted to her new neighbor, Maya (Bianca Lawson). Although Emily reveals that she has a boyfriend, Ben (Steven Krueger), his existence doesn't stop Emily from sharing a kiss with Maya that appears to be half on the cheek and half on the lips. And when we first see Emily and Ben interacting at school, their relationship seems less than perfect. Though Ben is affectionate with Emily and seems interested in her, Emily literally flinches at his every kiss and touch. Later, in the locker room, Ben responds aggressively when Emily does not want to get intimate with him; a classmate rescues her and slams Ben against a wall, creating a safe place from which Emily can tell Ben that it's over.

The potentially dangerous heterosexual relationship, reminiscent of the one shared by Willow and Oz in *Buffy*, left behind, Emily and Maya establish a sweet and supportive connection. The two create a solid bond together when they share their first real kiss in a photo booth, after which Emily is horrified to find that the pictures have been taken by someone. Given the threat of her relationship going public, Emily, like Santana, grows very anxious. She asks for time and space from Maya to figure everything out, and after a while, the girls go on dates and display their affection in public spaces, including school. After Maya is sent away to a juvenile disciplinary camp for drug use, Emily grows closer to Paige (Lindsey Shaw), her rival on the swim team. After Paige accuses Emily of having it easy during one of their heated conversations,

Emily says, "Easy? What planet do you live on? I've spent most of my life trying not to feel the way I feel." It seems, then, that even though Emily dated Ben before getting involved with Maya, she was always aware of her same-sex desires. Judging by her reactions to Ben's advances, her confession makes sense, and constructs lesbianism as an innate trait. The difference between Emily and other characters, though, seems to be that she understands her sexuality at an earlier stage, and her dating Ben is something she does even though she knows she is a lesbian. In other words, there is less discovery of gayness than there is an effort to hide it from others.

Emily, unlike other characters, does not have to sleep with a man as part of her learning curve. She dates Ben, as he provides useful cover, much like Santana's beard, but she does not have to sleep with him to discover who or what she is. She admits to Paige, for instance, that, though Maya was her first girlfriend, she was not the first girl she kissed. She was in love with Alison (Sasha Pieterse), in fact, who is a character presumed dead as of the first episode. Feelings unrequited, Emily says that Alison broke her heart. Paige and Emily date for a time, but Paige is determined to keep their relationship hidden from everyone. After Emily has had enough of being Paige's secret, she calls it quits – she is a lesbian and is willing to be publically known as that.

At the beginning of the second season, Emily dates Samara (Claire Holt), another classmate, for a short period of time before Maya returns. Maya and Emily quickly pick up where they left off; they profess their love and share passionate moments, though all of this comes to an abrupt end (see Chapter 3). In the third season, Emily reconnects with Paige, who has since come out to her parents. Their relationship is strong and close, but in the middle of this season, when Emily and Maya's male cousin, Nate (Sterling Sulieman), are both upset about what happened to Maya, they share a kiss. After telling Paige about the kiss, it is disregarded as an act fueled by confused, misdirected feelings and is more or less expunged from Emily's record without having an effect on her lesbian identity. Emily and Paige continue to date until the end of the fourth season, at which point tension and stress overwhelm their relationship and cause the girls to

tearfully say goodbye to one another. There is no indication that Emily left Paige for someone else, and certainly no indication that she will stop being interested in women.

Complicating the Paradigm

In some cases, gay female characters will date men before, after, and perhaps even during their involvement with women in a way that resists the exclusive lesbian label and complicates the paradigm that has, in the shows analyzed in the first part of this chapter, ended with the adoption of an exclusive lesbian identity. We first encounter one of these characters on *Roseanne*, which premiered in 1988 on ABC – six years before *Ellen*. The show's fourth season (still pre-*Ellen*), introduces Nancy (Sandra Bernhard), the spunky, flirtatious fiancée of Dan's (John Goodman) friend Arnie (Tom Arnold). Nancy and Arnie marry in Las Vegas, and she quickly becomes close friends with both Roseanne (Roseanne Barr) and her sister Jackie (Laurie Metcalf). After Arnie leaves Nancy, claiming in his goodbye letter that he was abducted by aliens, Nancy says and does many things that complicate our preconceived ideas about her apparent heterosexuality. In "Pretty in Black," Nancy calls into question expectations for passion and connection. She complains, for instance, that the sex she is having is lacking romance; she wants "poetry and flowers," not "limericks and edible panties." From this comment alone, it sounds as if Nancy missing something markedly feminine in her love life. Shortly after, in "Ladies' Choice," Nancy tells Roseanne and Jackie that she is dating someone: "Her name is Marla. I'm seeing a woman." When they don't believe her, she matter-of-factly says, "I'm serious, I'm gay." Arnie reappears in the next episode and attempts to patch things up with Nancy, and she tells him, quite assertively, that she's gay "and it has nothing to do with [him] or [his] masculinity." She also says that what they had "was not natural" ("Stand on Your Man"). Given her assertions, Nancy destabilizes arguments made against same-sex relationships by

reversing their logic and by rendering heterosexual relationships unnatural. Nancy and Marla continue to date until the end of this season, when Roger (Tim Curry), an acquaintance of Dan's, enters the picture. He and Nancy date in what they define as a casual, open relationship in which both of them can date "other women" ("Glengarry, Glen Rosey"). Nancy implies, though, that she is planning to just use Roger to get pregnant, thus making her true feelings impossible to know.

The relationship between Nancy and Roger fizzles out without much explanantion. In the sixth season episode "The Mommy's Curse," Nancy is discussing a bad date with a woman, and says that she is over women and is going to start dating men again. A few episodes later, she has a one-night stand with a woman she met at a business conference, and in "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," she goes on a date with a woman named Sharon (Mariel Hemingway) to a gay bar. (Roseanne and Jackie tag along, and in what has become one of the show's most memorable moments, Sharon kisses Roseanne.) One of the last references to Nancy's sexuality or relationship status comes in the seventh season, when she refers to Roseanne and other heterosexual individuals as "breeders" ("Skeleton in the Closet").

Judging by what Nancy has said about her sexuality throughout the series, we might be tempted to categorize her as an exclusive lesbian. However, we cannot disregard her marriage to Arnie, her relationship with Roger, or her off-hand comments about going back to dating men. What we can say about Nancy, who is regarded as one of the most confident and self-assured characters on the show, is that her sexuality is complex in a way that makes this representation groundbreaking.

Twelve years after *Roseanne* ended, *Glee* introduced the character of Brittany, whose somewhat fluid sexuality seems to have taken quite a few pages from Nancy's book. Unlike Santana, who has a coming-out experience that leads her to date women exclusively, Brittany has a bit of a different experience. During the first season, though we do not see Brittany in any serious relationships, we are able to learn about her sexual past. Recall that in "Sectionals,"

Brittany let it slip that she has had sex with Santana while on a group phone call, and that the two cuddle and link pinkies frequently. Near the end of the first season, Brittany says that she has literally "made out with everyone in the school," including girls, boys, and the janitor ("Bad Reputation"). Judging by this information, it seems that Brittany does not discriminate on the basis and gender, and may be bisexual.

In the second season episode "Duets," Brittany is hurt when Santana turns down the prospect of doing a duet, causing Brittany to choose Artie (Kevin McHale), a male glee club member, as her singing partner and boyfriend. While practicing for their duet, Brittany and Artie have sex. Later in the second season, when Brittany and Santana confess their love for each other, Brittany adds that she also loves Artie, and she refuses to break up with him. Artie soon becomes aware of the relationship developing between Brittany and Santana, though, and the two soon break up. In the second season finale, Brittany again tells Santana how much she loves her, but they are not confirmed to be dating until the next season.

When Santana goes to college in the fourth season (Brittany should have, but had to repeat senior year), it puts a strain on their relationship. In "The Break-Up," after kissing and exchanging teary-eyed I love yous, they call it quits. Five episodes later, Brittany starts dating Sam, another boy in glee club, who she says is the only person that has made her smile since Santana left. They "marry" in the next episode because they think the world is coming to an end, and they continue to date until the fourth season finale, when Brittany breaks up with Sam via text message. In the fifth season (airing as of this writing), Brittany is away at college, and her role in *Glee* is minimal. Though we have no way of knowing what the future holds for Brittany, her complex and complicated sexuality, much like Nancy's on *Roseanne*, is significant insofar as it is not unlike the sexualities of real-world gay women. And though she dates boys before and after she dates Santana, seeing this lesbian relationship as a phase would be a gross

misinterpretation. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the lesbian relationships on all teen dramas.

On *The O.C.*, which premiered in 2003, the character Marissa Cooper (Mischa Barton) goes through what can only be described as an experimental, rebellious phase when she dates bad girl Alex (Olivia Wilde). In the first season of the show, Marissa is only shown dating men. She is involved with Luke (Chris Carmack), the stereotypical jock, and Ryan (Benjamin McKenzie), the outcast and main character. When Alex is introduced in the second season, Marissa is in the middle of a steamy romance with D.J. (Nicholas Gonzalez), her family's landscaper. Marissa and Alex first meet when Alex is on a date with Ryan, and the two eye each other up and down. At this point, it is unclear if they are checking each other out or sizing up the competition for Ryan. In the middle of this season, we learn that Alex is bisexual when her female ex comes to town. Marissa sees the two women interacting at the club, and later that night, Marissa looks at Alex intently as if she is developing deep, intense feelings for her. They make eye contact and glance at each other's lips, but the scene ends without anything further happening.

In the next episode, we see that Marissa and Alex have started spending much more time together. Marissa skips school to spend time with Alex (who has been kicked out of school), and Marissa frequently stays the night at Alex's house. In the episode "The Second Chance," when Marissa asks to stay at Alex's again, Alex asks, "What are you doing with me?" Marissa becomes immediately defensive, and ends up saying that she will stay at home that night. Judging by her behavior, Marissa is obviously a bit troubled by her nascent feelings for Alex.

In this same episode, Marissa discusses these feelings with her best friend, Summer (Rachel Bilson), but is careful to not give away the gender of her crush. Later that evening, Marissa holds Alex's hand at a concert. They exchange knowing looks, and by the next episode, they're dating. Marissa and Alex have what appears to be a great relationship. They kiss passionately every chance they get, and from what can be inferred, they have also slept together.

In “The Father Knows Best,” Marissa blurts out to Summer that she has been dating Alex. When Summer asks if she’s “like a…,” Marissa quickly says, “No, no, I don’t know. I just, I really like her.” Clearly, she is not ready to adopt a lesbian or bisexual identity. In the next episode, Marissa says to her mother, “Alex is my girlfriend.” Significantly, she does not say “I’m gay” or any variation of the phrase. Later, when trying to comfort Marissa, her mother says that she “experimented, too” and that she “understand[s] that this is a phase” (“The Rainy Day Women”). Marissa, though she tells her mother she is moving out and leaves the room, does not refute or deny her mother’s claims.

Once Marissa moves in with Alex, the so-called honeymoon stage comes to an abrupt end as chores and rent factor into Marissa’s life for the first time. In “The Mallpisode,” Marissa admits to Summer that she misses Ryan, and later, during a fight, Alex confesses that she doesn’t think she fits into Marissa’s life of “pep rallies, cheerleaders, [and] boys” (“The Blaze of Glory”). This fight ends their short-lived relationship (they dated for just six episodes), and it also marks the last time Alex appears on *The O.C.* In the very next episode, Marissa and Ryan are already involved with each other again, and they date on and off until Marissa’s death at the end of the third season.

If it was not clear that Marissa’s lesbian relationship was just a phase, before she broke up with Alex, Marissa said that she was refraining from going home to her mother not because she loved Alex, but because it would “make [her] mom too happy” (“The Blaze of Glory”). It seems that Marissa, being the rebellious wild child that she is, decided that a relationship with another girl would be the best way to act out. According to scholar and professor Suzanna Danuta Walters, “what you really have there is a kind of gayness as aesthetic, as fashion statement,” so it is not surprising that Marissa resisted adopting a gay identity (*Further Off the Straight and Narrow*). And after Alex vanishes from the show, Marissa never looks back.

Analyzing the Paradigm

While some real-world lesbians do have heterosexual experiences prior to (and sometimes after) coming out, the fact that *almost all* lesbian characters on television have these experiences sends mixed and misinformed messages to audiences and keeps lesbianism tied to women having sex with men. Television producers may have good reasons for "portraying these lesbians as always potentially bisexual" such as assuaging "the discomfort of potentially homophobic viewers" (Beirne, *Lesbians in Television* 108), but what are the costs for the lesbian population? First and most obviously, this paradigm suggests that heterosexual sex, or at least heterosexual relationships, must have a hand in the construction of a lesbian identity. While lesbianism, linguistically speaking, requires reference to its other to be understood, that does not mean that the characters should have to sexually engage the other any more than heterosexual characters have to have a gay relationship to understand their sexual identity.

Such representations also suggest that women's (or perhaps just gay women's) sexuality is fluid, which, while true for some, is not true for all. They suggest that all "lesbians" are really bisexual, at least until they piece together the puzzle that is their lesbian identity, which positions the eternally exclusive lesbian as a myth. Not only does this give male viewers a false hope that they could become involved with (or, at worst, "convert") lesbians, but it also conflates two distinct and completely viable identities into one, thus obscuring their differences. Bisexuality is, of course, a legitimate sexual orientation, and I am not suggesting otherwise, nor am I suggesting that it should go unrepresented – however, the idea that all lesbian characters on television are bisexual disregards the lesbian identity just as it misconstrues bisexuality. Lesbianism and bisexuality might be further misunderstood as a result of the lesbian phase as observed in *The O.C.*, which sees lesbian relationships as experimental dalliances and may lead viewers to discount genuine connections between women in the real world, especially if they are young.

When handled poorly, gay women dating men can erase “lesbian potentiality,” and representations that could have been positive may be “reduced to traditional and damaging tropes about the unsustainability of lesbianism” (Hermans 121). But when handled well, gay women’s encounters with men can show us the tip of the complex iceberg that is sexuality, and that is a step in the right direction.

Chapter 2

Lesbian Femininity

"I think you're very pretty, and very feminine, and –"

"And very gay."

– *All My Children*

When a woman comes out to her family and friends as gay, she will necessarily undergo certain life changes. She might start sharing more information about the events in her life, bringing around partners to family functions, or discussing LGBT-related legislation at the dinner table. She might also, if she is anything like some of the lesbians on television, start dressing in a much more feminine way. Comfy hoodies and baggy jeans might be replaced with dresses, skirts, and low-cut shirts. Plain, straight, medium-length hair may be grown out, curled, and styled. A face that was once a stranger to makeup may become increasingly familiar with eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick. In other words, former tomboys may start to present themselves in ways that fit into the narrow mold of what men have typically deemed attractive.

Some gay women on television consistently dress in feminine ways, before and after coming out or having a lesbian experience. *The O.C.*'s Marissa Cooper is a prime example of this kind of woman, and during her three seasons on the show, she wears revealing tops, tight jeans, dresses, and heels (Figure 1). Marissa's long, wavy, always perfect hair and her use of eye makeup, blush, and lipstick to present a natural, Californian appearance complete her feminine look. Her short-term girlfriend, Alex, is also feminine, but is a bit more edgy than Marissa. She often wears short, denim skirts with sneakers and tank tops, and has a small amount of her blonde

Figure 1. Marissa (*right*) in a pink, shimmery, v-neck tank top, matching flats, and tight jeans; Alex (*left*) in a tank top, short, denim skirt, and sneakers.

hair dyed purple. Marissa and Alex create what would be classified as a femme/femme relationship, and as one of their male friends, Seth (Adam Brody), makes clear when he says he wants to "have the visual" of them being together, these types of relationships often serve as eye-candy for men ("The Rainy Day Women").

On *Glee*, girlfriends Santana and Brittany are both on McKinley High's cheerleading squad, the Cheerios. Much like football players are often seen as being hypermasculine, cheerleaders are seen as hyperfeminine, and we are never able to forget that Santana and Brittany are cheerleaders – they wear their uniforms in school, out in public, and even when they are at home, kissing in bed (Figure 2). To complete the cheerleader look, they usually have their hair back in tight ponytails, and both also wear earrings and makeup. Like Marissa and Alex, the relationship between Santana and Brittany is most definitely femme/femme, but the cheerleading element adds a peculiar twist. The argument could be made that the lesbian-as-cheerleader theme

Figure 2. Santana (*left*) and Brittany (*right*) in full cheerleader garb while at a restaurant.

plays into many a man's sexual fantasy, as any simple Internet search for lesbian cheerleaders would illustrate, and while this may be true, the theme also gives us an opportunity to examine the connections (if any) between sexual orientation and gender expression. The lesbian-as-cheerleader theme dates back to the 1999 film *But I'm a Cheerleader*, so titled to confront the belief that a girl who is feminine enough to be a cheerleader could not *possibly* be a lesbian. Assumptions such as these are always being made about sexuality and gender; a quick look at our own society's assumptions will reveal that gay men are to be more feminine, gay women more masculine. The fact, then, that most gay women on television are feminine is quite interesting.

The gay female characters on *Grey's Anatomy* and *Pretty Little Liars* are much the same. On *Grey's*, like on *Glee*, the gay women are often shown in uniform. Unisex lab coats, scrubs, and surgeon's caps make gender expression difficult, but through accessories and makeup, it is still easy to tell that Callie, Erica, and Arizona are feminine. When we do see these women at home, at a bar or an event, or coming back into work after a long night, their femininity is fully expressed in the form of dresses, revealing tops, high heels, and the like (Figure 3). On *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily and the various girls she dates are all feminine, as well. And though Emily is known as the jock among her friends, she is without any striking masculine character traits.

Figure 3. Callie (*left*) and Erica (*right*) walk into the hospital, still wearing their dresses from the night before.

What is even more interesting than the consistently feminine gay female character is the character who, after coming out, becomes much more feminine than she previously was. In 2000, ABC's long-running soap opera *All My Children* reintroduced the character of Bianca (Eden Riegel 2000 to January 2010, 2013; Christina Bennett Lind from June 2010 to 2011). Before Bianca came out to her family and friends, she was quite the tomboy (Figure 4). She usually wore T-shirts, jeans, hoodies, and loose-fitting button-ups, and though attractive, she wore no noticeable makeup. All of this changes drastically when Bianca comes out. Her hair, once straight and plain, is now more styled, and her face, once a stranger to makeup, is now seen with eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, and blush. Baggy T-shirts and hoodies are replaced with skimpy tank tops and revealing blouses (Figure 5). While Bianca's changes in clothing, hair, and makeup could be

Figure 4. Bianca before coming out.

Figure 5. Bianca after coming out.

attributed to her simply growing older (she was sixteen when she came out), the all-too-coincidental timing certainly makes it seems as if her coming out plays a role, as well.

Before Willow comes out in the fourth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, she, like Bianca, is a tomboy (Figure 6). She dresses rather plainly (save for her signature T-shirts and sweaters with cute, childish designs), never does anything with her straight, red hair, and wears little to no makeup. After she comes out, she is almost always seen in long skirts and dresses, and she does her hair and makeup regularly (Figure 7). Her girlfriend, Tara, also seems to follow this tomboy-to-femme trend. Before she and Willow start dating, she mostly wears loose-fitting baseball tees, and after, she wears long skirts and dresses similar to Willow's (Figure 8).

Figure 6. Willow before coming out.

Figure 7. Willow after coming out.

The character of Bev from *Roseanne* presents a strange case. In the show's ninth and final season (which is easily the most outrageous and absurd of them all), Bev (Estelle Parsons), Roseanne's mother, outs herself when she says that she had to pick up a *Playboy* to have sex with

Figure 8. Willow and Tara wearing dresses.

her late husband. Bev later finds a girlfriend, Joyce (Ruta Lee), and the two are often shown being very affectionate with each other. During most of *Roseanne*, Bev is not markedly feminine or masculine: she adopts an androgynous gender expression. Her hair is short, and she often wears loose-fitting sweaters and hats (Figure 9). When she starts dating Joyce, though, she dresses in a slightly more feminine way, and begins to grow out her hair (Figure 10). In the final moments of *Roseanne*, it is revealed that, among several other twists, Bev was not actually a lesbian. Still, her changes in appearance toward a slightly more feminine gender expression while she was thought to be a lesbian are important to take note of.

Figure 9. Bev before coming out.

Figure 10. Bev after coming out.

According to lecturer and queer representation scholar Rebecca Beirne, “Female masculinity, even in texts that do not visibly display it, is presented as inexorably enmeshed with true lesbianism” (*Lesbians in Television* 11). It is peculiar, then, that the overwhelming majority of gay women on television express themselves in feminine ways, and even more peculiar that after coming out, some choose to further intensify their femininity. What’s more, these televised femme/femme relationships, considered against the historical backdrop of the mid-twentieth century lesbian bar scene and its butch/femme relationships, are proof of a significant cultural change in terms of which lesbian couplings are acceptable. This vibrant bar culture, as detailed in works such as *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis and *Stone Butch Blues*, the thinly veiled autobiographical novel by Leslie Feinberg, was a haven for (mainly working-class) lesbians and a place whereby many were able to form and polish their butch or femme gender identities. Moreover, in this historical context, one’s gender expression actually mattered *more* than one’s sexual identity. A butch lesbian, for example, was just that – butch first, lesbian second.

Some lesbian feminists of later generations asserted that these strict butch/femme relationships “reproduced the patriarchy and institutionalized hierarchy in women’s relationships” (Kennedy and Davis 11). The femme/femme relationships that are televised today, of course, are vastly different than these butch/femme relationships. Could we claim, based on these 1970s lesbian feminist beliefs, that such femme/femme pairings thus challenge the patriarchy? That they destabilize hierarchy in women’s relationships? As such relationships are, at least on the surface, devoid of all things masculine, and as they are, again on the surface, relatively egalitarian, I believe these claims are reasonable. Perhaps femme/femme relationships are more subversive than it might seem.

There are several possible reasons why the mass feminization of lesbians on TV exists today. When a female character comes out as gay, she is associating herself with an identity that

has, as is discussed above, a cultural history, a history that identifies women who hate men or want to be men, who are overly masculine, and who seemingly identify with maleness. Thus, she is distancing herself from the concept of the "proper woman." As feminist theorist Monique Wittig has argued, lesbians should not be considered women at all, insofar as "woman" is a social construct created to partner with "man." Lest we not forget that the character is a woman, she is made to look more feminine. We might even say she is made to look more heterosexual, thus also suggesting that, except for being attracted to women, she is just like a "normal" woman. This makes sense according to scholar Marguerite Moritz: "Butch women push the gender border. Femme women are in their proper place, so that is acceptable. But butch women – they're just entering territory that is not supposed to be their domain" (*Off the Straight and Narrow*). It seems as if being a lesbian puts one in need of redemption, as if something "bad" ("deviant" sexuality) needs to be countered with something "good" (femininity) in a way that makes the construct of the feminine lesbian less threatening. On the other hand, though, feminine or heterosexual-looking lesbians, while they may appear less threatening, might actually do more to undermine heteronormative culture than support it. Though these women look like "normal" women who would be paired with men, they are *not*, and this further supports the claims made above about challenging patriarchy and destabilizing hierarchy.

Similar to lesbians dating men, making lesbians more feminine might also be a way to make viewers feel more included, for if these women are not sexually involved with men, they should at least look attractive to them, and if they are not like straight female viewers, at least they can appear to appreciate similar concerns for physical appearance. This explanation is supported by Sue Jackson's study of teens' reactions to gay women on television, in which many of the teens believed that "hot" (read: feminine) lesbians on television are "constructed to cater to men" (163). Beirne warns that we "should be wary of replicating the too easy association of femininity with heterosexuality," though, and I am not suggesting that a femme lesbian is any less

a lesbian (*Lesbians in Television* 105). This kind of femme invisibility is actually something that many real-world femme lesbians struggle with, as many of them, though they neither mean nor want to, pass as straight women due to their appearance. Often, the only way to tell that such a woman is a lesbian is if she is seen with her female partner. These women, because they do not "look" like they are part of the lesbian community, may not be recognized by either the heterosexual world or the LGBT community, creating a unique and troubling dilemma. And despite all of the femme lesbians on television, the issue of femme invisibility never comes up on any episode of any show (that I am aware of), and maybe this is because, in the eyes of television's producers, writers, and executives, it is not an issue at all. If these women, these passing heterosexuals, are only seen as gay when with their lovers on screen, could this make the viewing public more apt to accept them?

The overabundance of consistently femme and tomboy-turned-femme lesbians on television is impossible to overlook, and the fact that these representations are anything but representative of the real-world lesbian population is problematic. Many gay women looking for versions of themselves (or their future selves) on television may not end up finding anything (Jackson 165), and the solution to this problem, put simply, is that we need more – more lesbian representations, more diversity, and more complexity. Only when we get more will we have a chance to see the innumerable lesbian identities that exist on the spectrum of gender expression.

Chapter 3

Tragic Lesbian Love

"When is it gonna be right for me? When is it gonna be okay for me to have a girlfriend? A relationship, like you straight people have?"

– *All My Children*

Most people, gay or straight, monogamous or polyamorous, hope for their own version of a happily ever after. And while not everyone can be so lucky, in real life or on television, many experience some kind of relationship bliss at one point or another. In the case of several lesbian relationships on television, though, there almost always seems to be something ominous looming around the corner, something adding stress or tension to an otherwise happy union. Often, a lesbian love story that could have been a happily ever after turns into a happily *never* after as a result of faded feelings, infidelity, or even death. Of course, to make shows dramatic and entertaining, few television relationships are entirely successful, regardless of the sexual orientations of the characters – however, it seems that the success rate for lesbian relationships is much, much lower, making the idea of tragic lesbian love ripe for analysis.

Lesbians Find Love, Tragedy Finds Them

Soap opera relationships are always fraught with a drama and disaster, and Bianca's relationships on *All My Children* are no exception to this rule. Once Bianca comes out, it is revealed that her trials of tragic lesbian love predated her return to Pine Valley. After meeting and falling in love with Sarah (Elisabeth Harnois) in a rehab clinic, the two were able to keep in touch online. Their relationship dissolved quickly, though, leaving Bianca heartbroken and alone (we

are only told about, not shown, their relationship and its aftermath). Bianca tracks down Sarah and goes to visit her, only to find out that Sarah is engaged to a man. Bianca's impassioned attempts to get Sarah to leave her fiancé fail, and even though Sarah does eventually come out to her mother, a renewed relationship between the girls never develops. Around this time, Bianca also develops a crush on Laura (Laura Allen), who reminds her of Sarah. Unfortunately for Bianca, Laura is exclusively heterosexual, and Bianca's affections are again unrequited.

In September of 2001, Frankie (Elizabeth Hendrickson) arrives in Pine Valley and quickly connects with Bianca. The two flirt and grow close, and though Bianca has feelings for Frankie, Frankie neglects to show Bianca any affection. In late November, Frankie becomes more comfortable with the idea of a relationship with Bianca, and they show small signs of affection (holding hands, kisses on the cheek) and confess their love for one another. This period of bliss (or at least non-tragedy) comes to an abrupt end when Bianca walks in on Frankie having sex with JR (Jonathan Bennett), Bianca's cousin.

After Frankie is murdered, her identical twin sister, Maggie (Elizabeth Hendrickson), comes to Pine Valley. Bianca transfers her feelings from one twin to the other and immediately clings to Maggie, who identifies as heterosexual. Bianca is acutely aware of her luckless love, though, and at one point says, "It just seems like the only people I'm attracted to can't give me what I want" (2002). While it would be easy to say that this is merely one of the common representations of a person on TV – the person who is routinely attracted to the unavailable – for Bianca, as the only lesbian on the show, it means more than that; it means she remains a lesbian who is not allowed to love. As a result, she counts as a lesbian on TV, but is represented in a limited way, as a perpetually single lesbian that enables the audience to avoid seeing lesbians in love. When Bianca seems poised to break this pattern is when Lena (Olga Sosnovska) enters the picture. Lena is the first woman that actually seems interested in Bianca. Lena is sexually involved with a man at this time, but that doesn't stop her from going on a date with Bianca.

Soon, Lena becomes exclusive with Bianca, and they share daytime soap opera television's first lesbian kiss in April 2003 (the first primetime kiss occurred in 1991). As a result of some shady, undercover work that Lena did and the fact that Lena reminds Bianca of the man who raped her, however, Bianca tells Lena that their relationship is over, and repeated attempts to rekindle the relationship are unsuccessful. So while they could share the first kiss, they could not have the first fully represented lesbian relationship, as memories of heterosexual rape and pain will not allow it. In a weird twist of representation, then, forcible heterosexual sex, which was shown on TV, prevents lesbianism from being realized.

It appears in 2005 that Bianca's loveless lesbianism is about to change. Maggie has a change of heart and admits to Bianca that she loves her. Bianca and Maggie end up going to Paris together, and seemingly living together happily, albeit off screen like the lesbian couples from a decade earlier. But when Bianca returns to Pine Valley for her mother's wedding, Maggie is nowhere to be found. It is revealed in 2006 that Maggie cheated on Bianca with another woman in Paris, putting an understandable strain on their relationship and causing Bianca to return home. In 2007, after Bianca has a one-night stand with a random woman and a confusing almost-relationship with transwoman Zarf (Jeffrey Carlson), Maggie comes to town and tells Bianca that she loves her, misses her, and wants her back. Initially, Bianca tells Maggie that she isn't interested, but the two continue to try to make things work. Their relationship ultimately fizzles out. Bianca is again a lesbian without love.

When we see Bianca again in 2008, she lying in tornado debris and going into labor. (This makes for Bianca's second child. Her first came as a result of her rape.) Bianca is now involved with Reese (Tamara Braun), a woman that she met in Paris, and in 2009, the two marry in what was daytime's first lesbian wedding. Chemistry between Reese and Bianca's brother-in-law Zach (Thorsten Kaye) adds tension to their relationship, and once Bianca finds out that Reese

and Zach kissed the night before their wedding, she immediately wants a divorce, leading to another year devoid of all love and romance that ultimately ends in her 2011 divorce.

Three years after viewers think they will see Bianca in a happy relationship, and after three years of lesbian heartbreak, Bianca grows close to her lawyer, Marissa (Sarah Glendening), and eventually works up the courage to tell her how she feels. Marissa becomes uncomfortable and awkward around Bianca, but before long, she realizes that she has feelings for her, and the two share an intimate kiss in the park. They decide to move in together, and it seems that, for once in Bianca's life, she may actually get to experience a successful, committed, long-term relationships. Yet, no. In the final episode of the televised series, shots ring out in a crowded room. In the reboot of *All My Children* that was revived on the Internet in 2013, we see Bianca placing a single yellow rose at Marissa's grave. I now recall the question that Bianca asked her mom soon after coming out: "When is it gonna be right for me? When is it gonna be okay for me to have a girlfriend? A relationship, like you straight people have?" We can now answer this question, once and for all, with a resounding never.

But Bianca is not the only loveless lesbian or the only lesbian who experiences tragedy after tragedy that retains lesbians on TV as long as they are not in loving, romantic relationships with other women. On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Willow also endures a great deal of tragic lesbian love. In the fifth season, after Tara and Willow have already begun dating and come out to their friends, Tara receives an unexpected visit from her family. According to them (and as far as Tara knows), she is a demon, and she tries her best to hide this secret from her friends. She casts a spell that goes awry, resulting in none of the gang being able to see demons – and, of course, this occurs just as a group of demons attack them. As it turns out, Tara is not a demon at all, and it was all just a family myth constructed to keep the Maclay women in line. Nevertheless, the lesbian-as-demon theme, even if it was just present for this episode, does not exactly shed a positive light upon the lesbian population.

Later in the fifth season, after Willow and Tara have a fight about Willow's sexuality, both of them are upset and distraught. Tara is walking around campus alone, and she is the perfect prey for Glory (Clare Kramer), a powerful demon-goddess. Glory sits next to Tara and literally sucks out her brain, putting Tara in a strange, potentially permanent state of confusion that de-passions their relationship, rendering it more like friendship than love. Although the women move past this stage when Glory's damage is undone and Tara returns to normal, their love is still not allowed to flourish on TV.

In the sixth season, after repeatedly fighting about and breaking up because of Willow's overuse of magic, Tara goes to visit Willow for a heart-to-heart talk about repairing their relationship. "It's a long, important process," Tara says, pacing. "Can't we just skip it? Can you just be kissing me now?" Tara and Willow share an intense kiss, and the next episode begins by showing us the floor of Willow's room with clothes strewn everywhere. The women are naked under the covers, and their relationship seems better than ever. A few minutes later in the same episode, a stray bullet shoots through Willow's room and hits Tara in the chest, killing her almost immediately. Willow holds her as she turns, once again, to the dark side of magic. Even in this supernatural world where almost anything is possible (Buffy was resurrected twice), the relationship between Willow and Tara was fated to fail, as if lesbian love is destined to be tragic love.

On *Grey's Anatomy*, loveless lesbianism and tragic endings are also common. Callie gets her first taste of tragic lesbian love when Dr. Erica Hahn unexpectedly leaves Seattle Grace Hospital in the fifth season without even saying goodbye. In the sixth season, Callie spends most of her screen time without her new love, Arizona. Once they are together, though, in season seven, and seem poised to enjoy their relationship, Arizona leaves for Africa, leaving Callie behind. In the middle of the seventh season, when Arizona returns from her apparently shortened trip, she is determined to win Callie back. When the two are talking in the elevator and Arizona

asks for one more chance, Callie says, "Today I found out that I am pregnant – with Mark's baby" ("Start Me Up"). Arizona says nothing at first, but in the next episode, she tells Callie that she's committed to their relationship, and they move in together again.

For a short while (four episodes), Callie and Arizona enjoy coupled bliss. But in the opening scene of the musical episode "Song Beneath the Song," the two are in a car accident. Arizona, who was hit with the airbag, is bruised and bloodied, while Callie, who flew through the windshield, is motionless on the hood of the car. In what makes for an even more tragic rendering of the situation, when Arizona is explaining to Mark what happened, she says, "It came out of nowhere. I asked her to marry me and a truck came out of nowhere." Callie and her baby, who had to be delivered prematurely, are on the verge of death for the duration of the episode. Granted, once Callie wakes up, she agrees to marry Arizona, but the couple spends more time recovering from accidents and being apart than they spend together.

At the end of the eighth season, this trend continues, and it is Arizona's turn to have a near-death experience. Several of the characters, including Arizona, are in a plane crash with many of their fates unknown. In the first episode of the ninth season, we learn that as a result of her injuries, Arizona's left had to be amputated, and Callie was the one who had to make the decision which, of course, Arizona resents and spends the entire season illustrating. And while Arizona is hesitant about getting intimate with Callie again, this does not stop her from getting intimate with an old flame, Dr. Lauren Boswell (Hilarie Burton), at the end of the ninth season. Callie and Arizona are dealing with the aftermath of Arizona's infidelity, and their future is impossible to know as of the writing of this chapter, but their relationship demonstrates a common pattern of women who fall in love with women and then must endure car crashes, amputations, and any number of other tragedies that essentially function to represent lesbians without having to represent them in loving relationships with each other.

Arguably, the relationship that forms between Emily and Maya on *Pretty Little Liars* is doomed from the start. The two meet because Maya has moved into the house of Emily's friend Alison, who has been missing for a year and is presumed to be dead. Maya, like Alex from *The O.C.*, fits the bad girl stereotype, and her drug use eventually lands her in a juvenile detention/rehabilitation program. Emily struggles with her absence until she becomes involved with Paige, a fellow swimmer. In a conversation with Paige, we learn that Emily's tragic lesbian love predates *Pretty Little Liars* when Emily reveals that she fell in love with Alison, a straight girl, who did not love her back. Emily and Paige are involved for the rest of this season, but Paige's being in the closet puts a strain on their relationship, causing Emily to eventually break up with her.

In the second season, Emily has a short romance with Samara, which ends after the evil mystery character, A, blackmails Emily and forces her to give her phone number to one of Samara's friends. Maya makes a return to the show in the middle of this season, and begins dating Emily again immediately. The fact that Maya hooked up with a boy while she was in rehab is a non-issue for Emily, and it seems that the love between the girls is stronger than ever. Late in the second season, when Emily and her friends are walking around the neighborhood, flashing lights from emergency vehicles catch their attention. Emily runs to the scene and finds her mother, who tells her the tragic news – a body was found, and it's Maya's. We later learn that Maya was killed by her stalker ex-boyfriend, the boy she dated in rehab.

Emily struggles with the loss of Maya well into the third season. She reconnects with Paige, who has since come out to her parents, and in the fourth season, they begin to make college plans. Paige is going across the country to Stanford, and though Emily says at one point that she wants to go with her, later she comes to the realization that they won't be together the next year. Toward the end of this season, tensions rise between Paige and Emily as a result of A's interference and Alison's return to town. Emily and her friends are trying to keep Alison's

homecoming a secret, but Paige goes to the cops. Emily tells Paige that she forgives her for getting the authorities involved, but that she cannot trust her anymore. "What are you saying?" Paige asks ("Unbridled"). Emily simply says goodbye, gets into the car with her friends, and drives off. As of this writing, the fifth season of *Pretty Little Liars* has not yet premiered, leaving Emily's romantic future uncertain.

Understanding Tragic Lesbian Love

The theme of tragic lesbian love is too prevalent to be disregarded as coincidental or accidental; some force is causing these lesbian relationships to experience adversity, pain, and ultimately, termination. This force is none other than television's producers, writers, and executives, of course, and it would be foolish to think that there is no rationale, conscious or otherwise, behind such creative decisions. Perhaps it is that female pleasure – especially when it has nothing to do with a man – makes (male) viewers uncomfortable. This is one of the central arguments made in the 2006 documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, which casts a critical eye to the Motion Picture Association of America's inconsistent rating system. Consider, for example, the awarding of an NC-17 to 2013's *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, which received much attention for its seven-minute-long lesbian sex scene. Even 1999's *But I'm a Cheerleader* was given an NC-17 until director Jamie Babbit edited certain clips involving female pleasure from the movie. Such discomfort undoubtedly affects decisions in the television industry, as well.

Though most of the television programs that feature tragic lesbian love stories are relatively recent, the theme of tragic lesbian love is nothing new. *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* by Lisa Duggan, for instance, has at its core the 1892 murder of a woman by her female lover in Memphis, an event that quickly became a highly sensationalized international news story. According to Duggan, this narrative portrayed "romance between

women as dangerous, insane, and violent," much like the programs discussed in this chapter, all of which include horrible deaths or dreadful accidents. The Memphis murder narrative also "worked to depoliticize, trivialize, and marginalize the aspirations of women for political equality, economic autonomy, and alternative domesticities" (Duggan 10). Clearly, cultural narratives of tragic lesbian love, whether an embellished news story or a dramatic television program, have real effects on our lived experiences.

The message that televised tragic lesbian love stories sends to viewers is clear. According to programs such as *All My Children*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Pretty Little Liars*, lesbian relationships, fraught with drama, cannot be shown in their entirety if that entirety means a life of coupling, long-term commitments, or extended romantic interactions. Even those relationships that seem as if they will last forever are bound to come to an untimely end, and when they do, it may be because of faded feelings or dishonesty, or more extreme events such as cheating (with a woman or man) or death. Heterosexual relationships on television often undergo the same hardships, but since there are so many of these relationships, the tragic end of a handful does not make it seem as if *all* heterosexual relationships are doomed. When it comes to televised lesbian relationships, the tragic end of a handful, when there are only a handful to begin with, matters.

Chapter 4

Redeeming Representations

"I'm proud of who I am."

– HeartBeat

Not all lesbian representations cast a negative or injurious light upon the community. Many lesbian characters provide us with admirable, redeeming representations that send positive messages about gay women to the American public. In fact, almost all of the shows analyzed in this thesis have at least *some* redeeming element, something that enables them to push the envelope, to extend the boundaries of what can be represented, to challenge the paradigm of representation. And I would be remiss to not give credit where credit is due.

In late 1983, long before the kiss on *Roseanne*, or Ellen or Bianca came out, *All My Children* presented Dr. Lynn Carson (Donna Pescow). Lynn was an openly gay character, and according to sources and the limited footage available, she did not become romantically involved with anyone on-screen. In one episode, Lynn comes out to a friend, and the oddly formal discussion that occurs between them could have been titled "How to Talk to a Lesbian." Their conversation seems more suited for an instructional video than a soap opera, and in their short exchange, Lynn talks about everything from the idea of "looking gay" to the "born that way" debate. When her friend asks how long she's been gay, Lynn says, "Always. It's not a matter of choice. I've been gay ever since I was aware of my sexuality." She adds later, "I wouldn't [change] if I could."

Lynn's presence on the show, though brief, showed the American public a representation of a lesbian who was self-assured and took pride in who she was. *All My Children* was clearly trying to stress that lesbian are no different from straight women, as Lynn points out that "these are the same questions you would ask about any relationship," and says, "I have the same highs

and lows as you do. It's just that I prefer women." In the early 1980s, these were important things for audiences to hear.

From 1988 to 1989, the medical drama *HeartBeat* aired on ABC. This show, though forgotten by many and nearly impossible to find any footage of now, featured primetime television's first lesbian character, nurse Marilyn McGrath (Gail Strickland). She has a girlfriend, Patti (Gina Hecht), but the two act more like roommates than lovers when they are together. Despite this obvious lack of closeness between lesbian partners, *HeartBeat* was able to craft Marilyn into a strong, assured character. During a conversation with a man, she says, "I don't deny who I am… I'm proud of who I am." Like Lynn, the poised character of Marilyn did important, pioneering cultural work during a time when there was virtually no one else like her on television. Essentially, these women broke ground by altering the dominance of heterosexual representation and creating space for the representation of a different female sexual identity.

The 1990s followed their lead, showing a handful of positive representations of gay women on television. On *Roseanne*, Nancy was never ashamed of her feelings, behavior, or sexual identity (even though her behavior complicates lesbian identity given her willingness to sleep with a man to get pregnant). On *Ellen*, viewers witnessed an extensive coming out period where a popular character on television undergoes a shift in self-understanding such that she goes from sleeping with a man to entering a sexual relationship with a woman. And even though her growth includes a coming to be that includes sleeping with a man, after Ellen Morgan comes out, she is insistent about being normal – and she confronts those individuals, such as her parents and her boss, who may think otherwise. On *Friends*, partners Susan and Carol are both comfortable with who they are, and there is very little confusion about their sexual identities. Their wedding is the first lesbian wedding on primetime television, and though they were not on screen often (and perhaps *because* they were not on screen often), their relationship was one of the steadiest of the show – and stands as one of the steadiest lesbian relationships on television to this day.

Roughly twenty years after Lynn appeared on *All My Children*, and two years after Ellen Morgan came out, the show's next lesbian character, Bianca, provided us with another character who fervently denies any claims that she can be cured. On multiple occasions, she says that she is proud of who she is, and despite the tragedy that plagues her relationships, she remains strong and hopeful for the duration of the series. Bianca is also responsible for milestones such as daytime soap opera television's first lesbian kiss and first lesbian wedding.

On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, lesbian characters Willow and Tara share an intense, affectionate love that, they are both sure about who they are and who they want to be with, and at one point, they look after Buffy's little sister, thus showing that lesbians can be successful caretakers. According to scholar Stephen Tropiano, *Buffy* is also worth admiring because Willow and Tara are "fully integrated into [the] series without their homosexuality ever being an issue." Moreover, viewers are made to feel that Willow's love for Tara "is the most natural thing in the world," and when they kiss for the first time, it's simply "two lovers kissing. Just like lovers do" (Tropiano 184).

On *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars*, two of the most popular teen television shows as of this writing, lesbians are represented as having complex identities, and important lessons about finding acceptance – both within oneself and in society – are taught to impressionable young audiences. Both programs deal with serious issues that young lesbians face such as coming out in high school and coming out to family, and both show the support that peer groups can provide during difficult times.

It is not difficult to see why such representations are important. These characters are, as this thesis has argued, representing a population and sending out certain messages about that population. When those messages are positive, it helps the lesbian community in two significant ways. First, these messages are powerful for lesbians to hear themselves. They not only inspire, but they validate; they not only encourage, but they affirm. Lesbians do not get to see themselves

on television very often, so the representations that they *do* see should ultimately make them feel good about who they are and who they love. For younger viewers who may be just discovering their same-sex feelings, questioning who they are, dealing with coming out, or feeling alone in a world that seems to be against them, these representations are only more influential. According to Tropiano, "it is high school and junior high school students… – both gay and straight – who need to know that it's 'O.K. to be gay' the most," and it is also important to see "series regulars treated as just 'one of the gang'" (168). Much like the work that the "It Gets Better" campaign does, these representations need to show LGBT youth that gay men and women can be happy, healthy individuals, despite potential hardship. This may seem like an obvious goal, but it is too crucial to be left unsaid.

Second, positive messages influence the ways in which the lesbian community is seen from the outside. If television representations of lesbians depict them as confident, competent, self-assured, and proud, these are all things that could boost the way the lesbian community is perceived. These representations, as always, produce a cultural image of lesbianism. They extend the presence of gayness and same-sex love, they make things possible that may not have been before, and they have the ability to expand, as a result, the comfort zone of the audience. The work that these programs did and continue to do to is important, but it is still not enough.

Chapter 5

Strategies and Solutions for the Future

"And I only hope that one day, if I have a slightly odd relationship, you, too, will not judge me."

– Ellen

Ideally, in the future, I hope that the representations of gay women are so diverse that a thesis such as this would not need to be written, much like a thesis about the representations of straight men would not (or rather, could not, given the wealth of characters) be written today. We have quite a bit of work to do before we get to that point. Our representations today suggest, among other things, that most lesbians date men, that most are (or become) feminine, and that lesbian love is often tragic. So what *should* these representations be doing?

For starters, they should be round, fully developed, three-dimensional characters who are more than just their sexuality and more than tragic figures often living without love. In this thesis, because I examined only regular or recurring characters, I did not encounter many that were flat and two-dimensional. This does not mean, of course, that those kinds of characters do not exist. Especially when a lesbian character plays a smaller role, she may just be defined by her sexuality, leaving her unique intersectionality of class, race, and other identities ignored. This kind of simplicity, while often convenient for sitcoms, is never useful or accurate when it comes to discussing and describing living, breathing human beings. We are complex and complicated, and we should be represented that way.

Lesbians should be able to come out and have relationships with women without being killed off quickly. Moreover, they should be able to find partners without having to date, sleep with, become engaged to, or marry men. We should see gay women who are tomboyish, androgynous, or masculine, and who, after coming out, stay that way.

American audiences also deserve to see a lesbian-centric television show. Such a show is not a new idea; in fact, several have come and gone, including Showtime's *The L Word* and The N's *South of Nowhere*. Because these shows (and most like them) appeared on premium cable channels, they fall outside of the range of what is easily accessible television for most Americans, and thus outside of the scope of this thesis. Their successes, though, are still worth noting.

The L Word aired from 2004 to 2009, and it follows the lives of lesbian friends in Los Angeles. The main characters are fully developed, and none are defined solely by their sexuality. Most characters are exclusive lesbians in the sense that they do not have encounters of any kind with men. The show portrays lesbians of different races, ethnicities, classes, ages, gender expressions, and ability levels (Jodi, played by Marlee Matlin, is deaf) in a way that gives viewers a sense of the diversity within the lesbian community. And though scholars disagree about how positive and progressive *The L Word*'s representations really are, its groundbreaking, unwavering focus on lesbian life and love is something to admire.

In 2005, *South of Nowhere* premiered on the teen-focused network The N. It aired until 2008, and during its three seasons, it tells the story of teenager Spencer Carlin (Gabrielle Christian) as she adjusts to life in a new town. After developing a close relationship with classmate Ashley (Mandy Musgrave), Spencer comes to realize that she is gay in what I regard as one of the most poignant television portrayals of a coming-out story. *South* addresses realistic issues without overdramatizing them, and depicts the love that grows between Spencer and Ashley sincerely and honestly. The fact that show caters to young audiences who may be going through similar situations makes it all the more important. *The L Word* and *South of Nowhere* are just two examples of television shows that are heading in the right direction. Pioneering as they are, they are not perfect, but by placing lesbians at the center of their narratives, they are doing significant cultural work.

Asking for lesbian-centric programming is asking a lot, even with the successes of the above programs. Even *Will & Grace*, a very popular show that represented two gay men, could only do so largely because the show focused on the relationship between a gay man and his best female friend, rendering gayness visible and present in an important way, but doing so without excluding straight viewers or heterosexist values. And today, *Modern Family* includes two gay men as part of a much larger cast, integrating them in important ways, but not creating a show that focuses mainly on them. Other more gay-centric shows, such as *The New Normal*, have found limited success, suggesting that lesbian-centric shows may remain years away.

As this thesis has argued, much of the problem with lesbian representations is rooted in the fact that there are so few. Simply adding more representations will not solve the whole problem, but it is a crucial first step. My hope is that one day the representations of gay women on television reflect the true diversity and complexity of our humanity and our world. And if we are critical as viewers, mindful as creators, and committed as scholars, that day could be closer than we think.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Bachelor of Arts in English, May 2014
Emphases in Publishing and Creative Writing
Minor in Sexuality and Gender Studies
Schreyer Honors College Scholar

Honors and Awards
- The President’s Freshman Award
- The President Sparks Award
- The Evan Pugh Scholar Award (junior and senior years)
- Dean’s List all semesters

Publications and Association Memberships
- “The ‘L’ Word,” lyric essay, published in literary magazine *Kalliope*, 2013
- Co-authored *ESL Nutrition Workbook*, 2012, now in use at the Development Center for Adults in Pleasant Gap and the Mid-State Literacy Council in State College
- Member of Phi Beta Kappa honor society

Professional Experience
- Trainer at Lion Line, State College, PA – May 2013 to present
    - Calling Penn State alumni, parents, and friends on behalf of the university’s colleges, campuses, and programs
    - Training incoming employees to perform the abovementioned task
    - Raised over $23,000 through calling efforts to date; ranked among the top 10 performers (out of 180) for money raised in Fall 2013

- Editorial Intern at Xanga.com – June to September 2013
    - Developed original, engaging content for the Datingish.com website in the form of 6 – 8 blog posts per week
    - Interacted with the Datingish.com community daily

- Tutor at Development Center for Adults, Pleasant Gap, PA – January to May 2012
    - Tutored adults in reading, writing, typing and math
    - Assisted with various “life skills” such as counting money and accessing the Internet