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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by D. Renee Smith entitled "Peeking Out: A Textual Analysis of Heteronormative Images in Prime-Time Television." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication and Information.

Catherine A. Luther, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Michelle T. Violanti, Suzanne Kurth, Benjamin J. Bates

Accepted for the Council:
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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Detta Renee Smith entitled "Peeking Out: A Textual Analysis of Heteronormative Images in Prime-Time Television." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication and Information.

Catherine Luther, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Benjamin Bates

Michelle Violanti

Suzanne Kurth

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records)

Peeking Out:
A Textual Analysis of Heteronormative Female Images in Prime-Time Television

A Dissertation Presented for
the Doctorate of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Detta Renee Smith
December 2009

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DEDICATION

For Hailey and Jagger, my next generation of scholars.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces lesbian portrayals on network television from their earliest occurrences in the 1960s through the 1990s. A focus on episodic dramas and situation comedies reveals a concise representation of the mediated lesbian image. Building on existing research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender images on television, this work focuses exclusively on the lesbian image broadcast free of charge over the air during prime-time on commercial networks in the United States. Using a postmodern feminist framework, this textual analysis examines the images and texts portraying lesbian characters in episodic dramas and situation comedies. Furthermore, applying a semiotic lens to the analysis dissects the voice and actions of lesbian characters illustrating the ways production techniques and narrative scripting work together to represent a lesbian image on television.

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CHAPTER I
SETTING THE STAGE

Introduction

Today lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters occupy prime-time television roles as doctors, lawyers, siblings, neighbors, and ever-able personal assistants. These portrayals represent quite a change from the deranged killers and tragic victims of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, today's LGBT television characters also cast leering glances and play the role of predator. Garish images of homosexuality as victimized corpses or psychotic criminals populate prime-time courtesy of the proliferation of forensic crime dramas on the air. While some characterizations have changed, certain stereotypes persist.

Exposure to a greater diversity of characters on television, however, does not necessarily result in engagement with these more diverse characters. Some media critics laud ABC for the inclusion of transgender character, Carmelita, in the prime-time soap opera, *Dirty Sexy Money.* In the first season of the series Carmelita appeared in seven episodes. She shared scenes in the backseat of a limousine, a hotel suite, the home of another character, and on a New York City street while the series featured every other regular character in their own homes. The show's website provided biographical information for each of the regularly featured characters and the actors who portrayed them, with the exception of Candis Cayne, who portrayed Carmelita.

Whether the treatment of Carmelita's storyline on *Dirty Sexy Money* reflects a fledgling show searching for its audience and advertisers or whether it is indicative of a larger question of pervasive heterosexism in general, it seems to represent the status quo for LGBT characters on network television. Prime-time characterizations of sexual minorities remain somewhat formulaic and incomplete.

Although gay male depictions air with some frequency on network television, lesbian portrayals have dropped off significantly especially in the past five years. Fouts and Inch (2005) estimated gay male portrayals at 2% in a study of the 2000 television season, but found no lesbian characters in the shows they analyzed. Raley and Lucas (2006) identified nine programs featuring recurring lesbian and gay characters in the 2001 television season, but the characters did not appear in the actual episodes they analyzed. In addition bisexual and transgender storylines as well as plots involving LGBT people of color air with such irregularity they are difficult if not impossible to track.

The majority of academic research dealing with televised portrayals of sexual minorities examines the mediated image of gay males. Research on portrayals of lesbians remains an area ripe for exploration. This study seeks to make a significant and relevant contribution to the growing research in this field by investigating the lesbian image as it is presented on broadcast television.

This work builds on existing research on LGBT images on television, but focuses exclusively on the lesbian image broadcast during prime-time on over-

the-air commercial networks in the United States. Using textual analysis, I examine the images and texts portraying lesbian characters in episodic dramas and situation comedies. Furthermore applying a semiotic lens to the analysis dissects the voice and actions of lesbian characters illustrating the ways production techniques, narrative scripting, wardrobe, and casting work together to represent a lesbian image on television.

Central to this work are the images available to the widest American audience independent of technologies such as cable, direct broadcast satellite, internet protocol television, or other broadband offerings. It is important to note a digital divide created by such barriers as socio-economic status and geography constrains viewing in some areas. An emphasis on images broadcast free of charge and over the air on network affiliates of ABC, CBS,FOX, NBC, and CW/UPN allows a concentration on those shows regularly available to viewers in all television markets. I exclude PBS because the prime-time schedule of PBS affiliates varies greatly from station to station and market to market. For example, *In the Life,* a lesbian and gay-themed PBS production currently airs in only thirty-four states in the United States.

Prime-time in this analysis is defined by programming airing in the broadcast window that occurs between 8:00 PM and 11:00 PM in the Eastern and Pacific time zones and between 7:00 PM and 10:00 PM in the Central and Mountain time zones in the United States. Traditionally programs airing in this window enjoy the highest numbers of viewers and thus images from these programs are those most widely watched.

This study concentrates on images from regularly-scheduled fictional and episodic narratives. Thus it excludes news, reality shows, variety shows, game shows, sports, television movies, and special event programming such as miniseries. The episodic format and the prospect for recurring roles in dramas and situation comedies suggest those program types offer the most potential for analysis. Moreover recurring characters hold the possibility of developing over time and providing more nuanced portrayals for analysis.

Background

Historically lesbian television characters most frequently appear in one-time guest roles, but limited story arcs surface from time to time. More often than not these characters participate as part of large ensemble casts. Lesbian characters function mainly as comic foil or sexual titillation for a largely white, male heterosexual audience. In early television portrayals lesbian characters often assumed the role of villain, victim, or a problem to be rectified (Shugart, 2003b).

Almost always the narrative positions a lesbian character in a supporting role as a relative, best friend, neighbor, or work associate. When the character Ellen Morgan "came out" in the now infamous "Puppy Episode" on ABC's *Ellen* in 1997, she became the first lesbian character in an ongoing, title role on network television. More than a decade later Ellen Morgan and her subsequent CBS counterpart, Ellen Richmond,--also played by DeGeneres--remain the sole lesbian characters featured in a title role on network television. Rare is the

depiction of a lesbian character in a title role on prime-time broadcast television and even rarer is the depiction of a lesbian of color.

In late 1993, Fejes & Petrich published one of the first criticisms of lesbian and gay portrayals in the media. They charged that television heterosexualizes both lesbian and gay characters by denying “acknowledgement of gays and lesbians in their own distinct reality and diversity” [and excluding] “aspects of the identity, sexuality, and community that challenge the heterosexual regime” (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 412.) Gross (1991) notes, “They [mediated homosexuals] are ignored or denied—symbolically annihilated” (p. 26). Avila-Saavedra (2005) purports a general sanitization of homosexual images for the viewing public leaving homosexual characters devoid of any sexual connotation.

Moritz (1994) claims the consequences of portraying a lesbian on prime-time television include punishment or exclusion from the narrative. The character must disappear from the narrative through death, imprisonment, or another abrupt ending. She does not exist past the episode’s conclusion. These exclusion narratives persist in the current spate of network crime dramas. The *Law & Order* and *CSI* franchises feature lesbian perpetrators and victims on an intermittent basis throughout their television seasons as did *Crossing Jordan* and *ER* during their network runs. Tearful courtroom or interrogation room confessions work to silence lesbian participation nullifying any threat of reoccurrence. Lesbian guest roles dot the network landscape passing through the narrative to titillate but not persisting long enough to threaten the status quo. They prove inconsequential after fulfilling their role as provocateur.

Three particular historical compendiums outline the ebb and flow of homosexual depictions in film and television. Capsuto (2000) documents the history of homosexual images in television and radio from the perspective of media historian. The rich details of plotlines in his programming synopses paint a crisp picture of the mediated image of lesbians and gay men through the 1990s. Tropiano (2002) supplies additional details about the homosexual-themed narratives by grouping portrayals according to program genre. Gross (2001) approaches the televised homosexual image from a more empirical standpoint. His analysis of program narratives involving homosexuality frames the images in terms of their place in a mediated society.

Over the past forty-five years lesbian and gay male characters have certainly increased in frequency on network prime-time programming. At first glance today's contemporary characterizations seem outwardly more multifarious than their counterparts from the 1960s and 1970s. Have these portrayals actually evolved? How does the televised lesbian look? Act? Present herself? Is she allowed to participate in her narrative or does she merely provide conflict for her heterosexual counterpart? Do lesbian portrayals vary with the size of the role or the size of the cast? Close readings of the texts involving lesbian characters hold the potential of providing answers to these and other questions. Lesbian roles require in-depth analysis to fully comprehend their place in media history and American society. Alternative readings are needed to probe the depth of the characterizations and to seek out underlying meanings and messages relating not only to sexuality but to race, gender, and class as well.

This research sets out to explore these questions using a theoretical framework based on postmodern feminist theory. Postmodern feminist theory is concerned with language, purporting it to be the basis of knowledge formation. Thus, the way or ways meaning is formed becomes paramount. In discovering how meaning attaches to specific words or word signs, postmodern feminist theory places an emphasis on deconstruction of meaning. Deconstruction allows many varied interpretations of an idea to spring forth creating and validating a plurality of not only knowledge, but of experience as well. In this research I employ a textual analysis to extract coded messages in the texts of television programs featuring lesbian characters thereby deconstructing both the diegesis of the narratives and the composition of production elements in the media texts.

Furthermore, coupled with a focus on language, postmodern feminism places an emphasis on the male/female binary. Many postmodern feminist researchers identify this binary as the core of female oppression. Kaplan (1992, p. 251) explains this as “the idea that we need to analyze the language order through which we learn to be what our culture calls ‘women’—distinct from a group called ‘men’—as we attempt to bring about change beneficial to women.” Just as postmodern feminist researchers see a male/female binary as a major structure framing society, I argue a heterosexual/homosexual binary frames much of the major television network perspective in its treatment of lesbian characters. This binary imposes a heterocentrist norm on mediated images of lesbians. A deconstructivist approach exposes exclusion, rejection, and negation of those images outside the norm. The juxtaposition enforced when

deconstructing televised images allows for oppositional readings to emanate from the media messages.

This chapter set the stage for this analysis of the unfolding drama of the televised lesbian. It provided a very concise overview of the beginning notions of scholarship on the mediated LGBT image and described the overall framework of this research. Chapter 2 provides a more in-depth review of the existing literature and uses examples from a variety of television episodes to illustrate and support this documentation. Additionally, the chapter contains a discussion of the theoretical fabric of this study and introduces the research questions explored in the analysis. Chapter 3 describes the methodology applied including a discussion of the role of Transana video analysis software. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the findings of the analysis, and finally Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of this work.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesbian portrayals began airing on the networks in the 1960s, but prior to the 1990s only a handful of lesbian characters appeared in prime-time. At worst they were psychotic killers and at best confused, imbalanced, or closeted victims. All waited for conviction, death, or restoration of heterosexuality to banish their lesbian identity and return to them the normative role required by the narrative. Occasionally a sympathetic depiction surfaced, but in general early television relegated lesbian characters to guest roles as killer, mental patient, or victim. In several instances multiple exclusion narratives functioned simultaneously to abbreviate the lesbian participation.

During the 1975-1976 television season the short-lived CBS drama, *Executive Suite,* featured one such plot. In this characterization Julie Sorkin and Leona Galt share a close friendship. In quintessential soap opera fashion both women are unhappily married. Julie's husband is physically abusive, and Leona's husband is a philanderer (Tropiano, 2002). Julie, realizing her lesbianism, comes out to her friend. Leona in turn is forced to acknowledge her feelings for Julie. When Leona tearfully confesses her secret admiration, she becomes distraught and races into the street. Julie follows after her and is killed when hit by a truck (Capsuto, 2000; Tropiano, 2002). At her funeral, Julie's husband quarrels with Leona, and she subsequently suffers a nervous breakdown (Tropiano, 2002). The narrative punishes both women for the sin of merely naming their transgression. Institutionalization or death veils the lesbian sexuality.

The Players

Killers, Crazies, and Closet Cases

One of the earliest exclusion narratives features the murderous lesbian. She kills out of greed or jealousy and generally shows no remorse for her evil deeds. The “killer-dyke” (Capsuto, 2000) phenomena first emerged in 1974 on the ABC series, *Police Woman*. In “Flowers of Evil” Angie Dickinson in the role of Sergeant Pepper Anderson goes undercover as a nurse at a retirement home to solve a murder. She suspects the three female administrators of the nursing home of murdering elderly patients and stealing their assets.

The trio is identified as “the Butch, the Bitch, and the Femme” (Cordova, 1975). Young and naïve, Janet represents Cordova’s “femme” image. The mastermind of the plot, Gladys, fulfills the role of “bitch.” She tersely barks orders at the others. Mame is marked as butch by her hairstyle and dress. Her uncombed hair is cropped short. Her wardrobe consists of a denim shirt or a sloppy sweatshirt with dark pants. In contrast the other two have stylish coiffures and wear fashionable pantsuits.

Until Janet tearfully confesses her love for Gladys in the interrogation room, exchanged glances and insinuations only hint at the sexuality of the criminals. Mame, the butch accomplice, whispers her confession to officer Styles. She cannot voice her sexuality to the viewing audience, and officer Styles cannot reveal her secret. He simply exits the interrogation room saying, “Game called on account of mud.” In the hallway he asks his fellow officer, “You got some soap? I

want to wash out my ears" (Bloch & Hanke, 1974). Sergeant Crowley describes the trio to Pepper saying, "One of them looks like she ought to be driving a diesel truck. The other two were pretty much the same—maybe a little more discreet" (Bloch & Hanke, 1974). In the original script Pepper replies, "If you mean to say lesbian, say lesbian." However, NBC deleted her line during editing of the episode, and it did not air (Capsuto, 2000). Interestingly, the 2006 DVD re-release of the program includes the line.

The killer lesbian theme resurfaces in 1986 on NBC's *Hunter* in an episode entitled, "From San Francisco with Love." The program features Sergeant Valerie Foster, a female police detective turned lesbian killer. The macho Hunter pursues, beds, and eventually charges Valerie with murder. As the plot unfolds, the viewer learns that Valerie conspired with her wealthy female lover, Casey, in murdering Casey's husband and stepson to claim their estate's millions. When arrested, the lovers turn on each other, and each implicates the other in the murders (Moritz, 1994).

Although hidden until midway through the program, the lesbianism in this instance is more explicit. Through staging, camera blocking, and actions the characters reveal their lesbianism. The characters hug and touch somewhat sexually (Gross, 2001). Casey runs her hand along Valerie's face and coos, "You'll look better in sable" (Garman & White, 1986) when Valerie inquires about getting a mink coat. This sexuality positions them as dishonorable. "They have transgressed by being lesbians, murderers, and disloyal lovers. They are

obviously beyond restoration to a ‘normative’ female role. For these actions they will be removed from society and properly punished” (Moritz, 1994, p. 319).

Perhaps a casualty of the aggressive machismo of the title character, Hunter, the overtly masculine butch stereotype is missing in this episode. Valerie is clearly positioned in the butch role with her swagger and insatiable sexual appetite, yet she is presented as a femme fatale. She sports the requisite big-hair style indicative of the popular fashion culture of the 1980s. She is stylishly dressed and made up and is anxious to don a fur.

The killer dyke image continues to thrive in prime-time dramas. Characterizations change course with pop culture trends such as fashion, but they remain marked as depraved. At various times the image is enmeshed in narratives of insanity, but what separates the killer dyke is her total lack of conscience about her crimes. Whether she kills for love or money, she carefully and calculatedly plans her actions. She sometimes stalks her victim seemingly enjoying the predator/prey relationship. However, she is not above hiring someone to do the actual killing or blaming others for her criminal offenses. Her narrative fate remains death or imprisonment rather than institutionalization or rehabilitation.

The killer dyke stereotype relates to another prevalent characterization--the crazy lesbian. In early television portrayals, homosexuality is presented as a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality a mental disorder until 1973 (APA, 1973). A typical depiction of homosexuality from the sixties and seventies associates homosexual feelings with a

dysfunctional relationship with a parent (Tropiano, 2002). The doctor, detective, or lawyer in a leading role discovers the character's usually latent lesbianism and pinpoints it as the source of whatever dilemma surrounds her. Revealing the secret of her sexuality, allows the character to accept a miraculous, curative restoration or recuperation to heterosexuality. Her only other alternative is punishment through institutionalization or death in the narrative.

The earliest lesbian characterization on network television established the crazy lesbian stereotype. NBC premiered television's mentally unstable lesbian character in 1963 on *The Eleventh Hour*, a one hour medical drama about a team of psychiatrists and their patients. In the episode "What Did She Mean by Good Luck?" Hallie Lambert struggles to interact positively with her fellow cast members and the crew of her new play, so she contacts her psychiatrist, Dr. Richard Starke, for help (Tropiano, 2002.) He links her behavior to a subconscious sexual attraction to the play's female director. According to the doctor, Hallie's conduct relates to a repressed memory of her mother's punishment for a similar childhood crush. The show portrays Hallie as a "neurotic, paranoid, mean-tempered lesbian mental patient" (Capsuto, p. 44). The narrative exiles her for her lack of conformity to the established standards of heterosexuality. Hallie works through her issues in therapy, and her amiable personality returns along with her heterosexuality (Tropiano, 2002) thus dismantling her lesbian identity. Hallie's recuperation to heterosexuality restores her place in the narrative.

After Hallie, lesbian television characters disappear for nearly a decade, but in 1972 another NBC offering, *The Bold Ones: The Doctors*, also relates a character's lesbian sexuality to an abnormal relationship with one of her parents. In the episode "A Very Strange Triangle" young nurse Valerie cannot choose between her former male beau, Dr. Marty Cohen, and her current lesbian mate, Eleanor. The elder Eleanor represents a mother figure for the confused younger woman. Valerie eventually has sex with Marty, but not in an attempt to "cure" her sexuality. She explains their sexual encounter as an experiment in having sex with a man (Tropiano, 2002). Unable to reconcile her feelings about both Eleanor and Marty, she leaves town abandoning both relationships for a fresh start (Tropiano, 2002). Again, eradication from the narrative solves the problem of the lesbian narrative.

CBS reframes the mental illness plot in 1973 on their popular drama *Medical Center*. The episode "Impasse" featured Lois Nettleton in a guest role as psychiatrist, Dr. Annie Claymor (Capsuto, 2000). *Medical Center's* star, Chad Everett, portraying Dr. Joe Gannon, consults Annie about a young female patient, Tobi, who refuses treatment for a heart condition. Tobi's refusal of treatment stems from her homosexual feelings for a friend. Following a phone conversation with this friend, Tobi races to the hospital roof. When Annie tries to rescue her Tobi shouts, " You gonna give me some good tips on how to be a good homosexual? I don't need any lessons… Now I'm gonna get a lecture on the joys and privileges of being a lesbian!" (Oringer, 1973). She refers to her same sex desire as a disease. Annie counsels Tobi to be true to herself and her

dreams. Tobi decides her ideal role is as wife and mother. With this decision made, Tobi is restored to heterosexuality. She consents to the surgery and resumes her normative role in society.

In contrast to killer dykes the crazy lesbians are merely unbalanced rather than psychotic. Both Hallie and Tobi show immediate concern and angst about their homosexual feelings. Hallie promptly seeks treatment for her “mentalness” while Tobi chooses to hide her feelings even to the point of refusing lifesaving treatment for her medical condition. The crazy lesbian character apologizes for her lesbianism and actively participates in its eradication. They happily seek to return to a normative position in the narrative.

Along with these somewhat sympathetic portrayals of the mentally ill lesbian in the early 1970s the lesbian closet cases emerge. These characters keep their sexuality confidential as they interact with other characters. Typically a fringe character reveals the lesbian secret through some allegation or insinuation of impropriety. Closet cases take two roles in the narrative. The first exposes a closeted lesbian by accusing her of sexual misconduct. The second lesbian closet case martyrs herself to attest to another character’s heterosexuality.

Owen Marshall, Counselor at Law led off their 1972 television season with the controversial episode, “Words of Summer” (Tropiano, 2002). In the script Marshall defends a college diver, Ann Glover, on charges of molesting a young girl she coached. Eventually the child, Ardis, admits that she fabricated the story in an attempt to garner attention from her Mother (Tropiano, 2002). In an important scene the prosecution calls Ann’s former roommate, Meg, to the stand

to discredit Ann. Meg, an “out” lesbian, instead defends Ann by testifying that their relationship was platonic. “Viewers are introduced, perhaps for the first time on television, to a stable, self-identified, politically minded lesbian secure in her lesbian identity” (Tropiano, 2002). Although the prosecutor positions homosexuality negatively and as evil or wrong, the positive portrayal of Meg presents a woman comfortable with her sexuality and her lesbian identity.

In “Impasse” *Medical Center’s* Annie provides the closet case example. While working together on Tobi’s case, Annie and Joe share a kiss. The viewer soon discovers Annie’s lesbianism through a mysterious phone call that Annie receives at the hospital. The caller asks if Annie’s female patients know she is a lesbian. The scene ends as the camera zooms in tightly on Annie’s ashened face. An ominous soundtrack worthy of a Hitchcock thriller swells as the scene fades to black. The caller is never identified.

Annie and Joe socialize throughout the narrative. They share dinner and a kiss as they work on Tobi’s case together. When Tobi’s boyfriend, Sam, portrayed by a very young Tim Matheson, divulges Annie’s sexuality, Joe confronts Annie. He does not believe her when she affirms her lesbianism. She replies, “Why not? Because I didn’t bite you on the ankle when you asked me for a date? Because I let you kiss me, and I enjoyed it?” (Oringer, 1973). When Joe protests that she does not act like a lesbian, Annie delivers a speech dispelling many of the common myths about lesbianism that prevailed in the 1970s:

> ANNIE: I am a person. I am a woman. I am a psychiatrist. And I am a homosexual. And we are not all the same anymore than heterosexuals are all the same. I am not—I am not repelled by the

> opposite sex. But on a deeper level, any fulfillment comes with other women, that's all. Is that so hard to understand? (Oringer, 1973.)

"Impasse" features Annie as comfortable in her sexuality and as a lesbian who acknowledges the prejudice of her peers. She challenges Joe's homophobia:

> ANNIE: "You think you are an enlightened man. Free of all prejudice. But somewhere in your mind, there's a sneaking notion that a lesbian can't be trusted to live up to her professional vows and treat a patient of the same sex without pouncing on her." (Oringer, 1973.)

On one hand the positive portrayals of the early 1970s allowed viewers to see well-adjusted women managing multiple roles in society as doctors, teachers, and police officers. On the other hand the discovery of lesbianism in each of these roles compromises and sometimes undermines the characters actions. In addition all of the characters are white women. Women of color for the most part do not exist in 1970s television, and certainly lesbians of color are not factored in.

Predators, Professionals, and Protesters

As the narratives of mental illness subside, the role of lesbian predator emerges. These portrayals generally exonerate the lesbian character at the end of the episode, but raising the issue of a lesbian vulture problematizes her sexuality. While these portrayals educate America about acceptance, they also conflate homosexuality with molestation by depicting the lesbian characters as alleged predators. Some shows go even further by linking feminism to lesbianism and in turn lesbianism to pedophilia.

Police Woman revisited the lesbian theme in 1976 with "Trial by Prejudice." In this episode a female suspect accuses Pepper of molestation. Pepper's dilemma worsens when she kills the suspect in a shootout (Tropiano, 2002.) Pepper's exoneration hinges on the testimony of her lesbian friend and former roommate, Marlena (Capsuto, 2000; Tropiano, 2002.) Like Meg from *Owen Marshall*, Marlena's lesbian experience validates Pepper's heterosexuality. The closeted Marlena reluctantly agrees to help knowing it means the end of her successful career as a business professional (Capsuto, 2000.) Pepper resigns from the police force to protect Marlena's reputation. At the last moment new evidence exculpates Pepper, and she returns to her job. (Tropiano, 2002). Marlena holds no further purpose for the narrative and thus vanishes.

NBC consulted with the Gay Media Task Force to script "Trial by Prejudice" (Capsuto, 2000; Tropiano, 2002). Marlena, a former roommate mentioned by Pepper in "Flowers of Evil," enters the plot as successful businesswoman with much to lose if she outs herself to testify on Pepper's behalf. Scripting Marlena as both a successful executive and an upstanding citizen who will "do the right thing" by sacrificing her own reputation in the pursuit of justice, positions the homosexual character in a new light on network television. However, scripting Marlena's status as contingent on concealment of her sexual identity remains problematic.

A later version of the police-woman-as-molester plot occurs in a 1986 episode of *Hill St. Blues*. In this updated version of the plot, the producers introduce officer Kate McBride as the new police partner of series regular, Lucy

Bates. In “Look Homeward Ninja” a female suspect unjustly accuses Kate of sexual harassment. Lucy reacts surprised but nonchalant when Kate reveals her lesbianism. Lucy works with Kate to help her clear her name (Tropiano, 2002). Kate appears in at least three more episodes of the series, but the lesbian storyline receives no more attention (Capsuto, 2000). After Lucy helps clear Kate’s name, the lesbian story ceases to revolve around the heterosexual. Its importance diminishes in the narrative.

Not confined to police dramas, the accused molester theme resurfaces in a 1977 episode of ABC’s *Family.* In “We Love You Miss Jessup” a student accuses Buddy Lawrence’s favorite teacher, Flora Jessup, of molestation (Capsuto, 2000; Tropiano, 2002). The townspeople assume the lesbian’s guilt and call for her resignation (Capsuto, 2000). Already confused by her feelings, Buddy becomes even more so when a fellow student confronts her about her relationship with Miss Jessup:

> STACEY PALMER: Some of us have always wondered about you, Buddy.
>
> OTHER GIRL: I certainly have. I meant to ask: how come you wanna try out for the boys' basketball team?
>
> BUDDY: For your information, there's a law about discrimination in sports.
>
> STACEY: I bet I know who taught you that. Hey, Buddy-- when Miss Jessup leaves, is she gonna take you with her, the way she did the girl in her other school?
>
> BUDDY: What are you talking about?!
>
> STACEY: For your information, Buddy Lawrence, people go by what they see (Gould & Parone, 1977).

By the late 1970s conservative media activists such as Donald Wildmon, Anita Bryant, and Jerry Falwell began to mount campaigns against homosexuality, sex, profanity, and violence on television (Capsuto, 2000). Although scripted in response to the popularity of a gay-themed episode from the previous season, ABC threatened to shelve "We Love You Miss Jessup" to placate the conservative media activists. Producer Nigel McKeand rallied the support of Aaron Spelling and Leonard Goldberg in persuading ABC to air the episode (Gitlin, 1983.)

The conservative backlash continued through the mid 1980s. After 1977, lesbian characters were on hiatus from network television for roughly five years. When they returned, the message changed--coming out no longer promised acceptance. The lesbian identity of the seventies all but disappeared in the sanitized media images of the early 1980s. However, producers such as Norman Lear and Aaron Spelling continued to push the network programming boundaries (Gitlin, 1983; Turner, 2000) by including lesbian characters in their series. While not necessarily well-rounded portraits of lesbian characters, these plots at least kept the lesbian dialogue alive on network television. The eighth episode of Spelling's *Hotel* in 1983 featured the first lesbian-themed plot of the series. In "Faith, Hope, and Charity" playwright, Zan Elliot, and her best friend, Eileen Weston, meet at the hotel to celebrate the opening of Zan's new play. A drunken Zan divulges her sexual orientation and then reveals her attraction to Eileen. As a result of Zan's confession, Eileen promptly engages in a one-night stand with a

man she meets in the hotel bar. Zan retaliates by sleeping with a female aerobics instructor (Tropiano, 2002). The two reunite the following morning to commiserate and eventually reconcile their friendship (Capsuto, 2000) if not their personal philosophies.

Another significant lesbian portrayal in early eighties episodic drama appeared on *St. Elsewhere*. According to Capsuto (2000), NBC planned to feature a series regular in a lesbian role on *St. Elsewhere* in the 1984-85 season, but the actress chosen for the role persuaded producers to reconsider the storyline (Tropiano, 2002). The two-episode story arc culminated in "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" airing in November 1984. In the episode Dr. Annie Cavanero befriends the visiting Dr. Chris Holt. After Chris comes out to her, Annie displays her homophobia by telling other members of the hospital staff about Chris' sexuality. When Chris confronts her, Annie is brusque. "What you do is perverted. Sex between two women is unnatural…I was taught women shouldn't have those feelings and if you do it's wrong. It's just wrong" (Tropiano, p. 42). Annie eventually redeems herself with an apology, but Chris' character leaves the hospital staff at episode's end. Similar to other eighties portrayals the well-rounded lesbian character falters in the narrative.

The truncated gay and lesbian portrayals continued throughout the late 1980s. As lesbian and gay political groups organized and demanded changes by the networks, more positive portrayals superseded the killer lesbians and sexual predators. The emergence of the AIDS crisis reshaped television images of gayness. AIDS created more awareness of gay issues, and television created a

mediated image of AIDS as a gay male disease (Hart, 2000). As Rock Hudson and Max Robinson died from AIDS or Greg Louganis and Magic Johnson announced their HIV status, network television could no longer leave sexuality out of the discussion. The media could not exclude gay male sexual behavior (Fejes & Petrich, 1993) or depiction of a gay life style from the discourse. The networks grew more accepting of lesbian portrayals especially if the scripts held a heterosexist view and excluded any notice of same-sex desire (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). The invisibility of lesbianism removes the need for any conflict surrounding their sexuality (Hantis & Lehr, 1994).

The political activism of gay and lesbian groups against the networks during the 1980s engendered change. Lesbian and gay activist groups organized at the network level, but also attacked at the local affiliate level when necessary (Montgomery, 1981, 1990; Alwood, 1996). As media attention to the LGBT activists grew, the networks began to comply with their requests. Eventually a middle ground emerged that satisfied both media censors and the activists. While an improvement on the worst stereotypes, this new network sensibility for the most part fell short of truly novel or progressive roles for lesbians. Lesbian portrayals became fashionable but not necessarily realistic (Shugart, 2003b).

Hotels, Heartbeats, and Hidden Desire

The absence of sexuality in lesbian-themed narratives dates back to early lesbian depictions in prime-time. Although *Hotel* ran “Faith, Hope, and Charity” in its first season, lesbian characters were not featured again until the final season of the series five years later. At the end of the 1988 season “Contest of Wills”

subtly explores the lesbian relationship of hotel employees, Carol and Joanne. Joanne dies in an auto car accident, and leaves a videotape revealing her relationship with Carol (Moritz, 1994). The outed Carol becomes powerless. She asks her male boss if she still has a job. She implores a co-worker to give her advice. She refuses to fight Joanne's father for any part of Joanne's estate settling instead for her memories (Moritz, 1994). At the last moment realizing that Carol is his sole link to his deceased daughter, the father reverses his stance. Carol obtains some measure of success in her struggle with Joanne's father but only after the eradication of sexuality from the narrative through the death of her lesbian partner (Moritz, 1994) and the gracious generosity of Joannne's father.

Esther Shapiro and Aaron Spelling Productions scripted a controversial yet sexless lesbian portrayal on ABC's *Heartbeat* in the 1988 television season. Seen as a breakthrough to some and a disappointment to others, *Heartbeat* delivered the first ongoing lesbian role since Kate McBride from *Hill Street Blues.* In *Heartbeat* lesbian nurse practitioner, Marilyn McGrath, takes the screen as a founding member of an innovative feminist medical clinic for women (O'Connor, 1988; Torres, 1993; Capsuto, 2000; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001). During a 1988 *Good Morning America* interview, series star, Kate Mulgrew, tabbed the show "a perfect reflection of what's going on in the 80s for women." However, Capsuto (2000) holds a different opinion, "The straight characters seem perfectly comfortable with Marilyn and [her partner] Patti, but the camera blocking, and the writing hold the couple at arms length, which send the viewer conflicting signals" (p. 241).

The two final episodes of the first season, “To Heal a Doctor” and “The Wedding,” illustrate Capsuto’s criticism. In this storyline Marilyn’s daughter, Allison, plans her wedding. She makes it clear that she does not want Patti to attend the wedding with Marilyn although Allison’s father will be attending with his new wife (Moritz, 1994). After much deliberation and assurance that she will not become a lesbian like her mother, Allison concedes and allows Patti to attend the wedding (Moritz, 1994; Tropiano, 2002).

The episode’s climatic ending resolves three heterosexual subplots by depicting the couples leaving the wedding reception to go off in pursuit and fulfillment of their sexual conquests (Moritz, 1989, 1994). Marilyn and Patti, on the other hand, do not exhibit any sexuality (Hantis & Lehr, 1994; Moritz, 1994; Gross 2001; Walters, 2001; Tropiano, 2002). They remain “prim and proper, completely self-contained and unobtrusive. The narrative closure of *Heartbeat* clearly shows that what does not happen to the lesbian couple is more important than what does” (Moritz, 1994, p. 132). The scripting and direction exclude more than their sexuality. Marilyn and Patti simply do not participate on the screen or in the narrative. “They have obtained permission to come to the wedding this closure does not permit them to participate” (Moritz, 1994, p. 133).

The conservative media of the 1980s climate impacted programming in other ways as well. *Hotel* ranked twelfth in the ratings in the 1984-85 season while *Dynasty* and *Dallas* ranked first and second respectively. When the next television season arrived, family oriented situation comedies replaced prime-time

soaps. *Cosby* and *Family Ties* superseded *Dynasty* and *Dallas* in the coveted one-two positions (Tropiano, 2002).

With the popularity of the family situation comedy, new opportunities for lesbian characters arrived, but limitations persisted. In 1984 CBS' *Kate and Allie* features a lesbian couple for a single episode. In "The Landlady" Kate and Allie face the dilemma of a rent increase when their landlady discovers two families living in one apartment (Capsuto, 2000; Walters, 2001; Tropiano, 2002). They masquerade as lovers to qualify for a lower rent schedule. The tables turn when their landlady, Janet, comes out to them (Capsuto, 2000; Walters, 2001; Tropiano, 2002). Kate and Allie socialize with Janet and her partner, Miriam, as a devoted couple. When Janet learns of the deception, she redefines her definition of a family (Capsuto, 2000). Although Janet and Miriam hold the promise of being recurring characters, they do not appear again (Capsuto, 2000).

The Golden Girls also featured a lesbian character in the 1980s. In "Isn't It Romantic" during the 1986 season Jean, a college friend of Dorothy, comes for a visit with the "girls." Interestingly, Lois Nettleton, the actress who also played the role of Annie Claymor on *Medical Center* a decade earlier, portrays Jean. Once Jean arrives, she and Dorothy decide to keep Jean's sexuality a secret from Rose and Blanche. Over the course of her visit Jean develops an attraction for Rose and decides to cut her visit short (Capsuto, 2000; Moritz, 1994). When Jean discloses the truth, Rose does not overreact:

> ROSE: Well, I have to admit I don't understand these kinds of feelings. But if I did understand, if I were--you know--like you, I

> think I'd be very flattered and proud that you thought of me that way (Duteil & Hughes, 1986).

While the overall scripting of the program seems supportive of Jean's lesbianism in general, the tone and direction of the scene confuse the message. Jean looks and dresses the same as the other characters (Moritz, 1989). However, Jean's crush on Rose raises the issue of misplaced sexual attraction or preying on a heterosexual woman. She cannot successfully navigate the multiple identities of lesbian and friend. Furthermore, both Dorothy and Sophia manipulate Jean's sexual identity to make it acceptable for Rose and Blanche and thus the viewing audience. Secrecy and removal from the narrative solves the problem of Jean's sexuality.

Even with the changing climate Fejes and Petrich (1993) concluded that a "regular network program with gay or lesbian main characters is far in the future" (p. 402). It was indeed four years later when Ellen Morgan came out in 1997 in the "Puppy Episode" of *Ellen* and five years later when *Will & Grace* premiered in 1998. Lesbian and gay characters have been far more successful in leading roles on cable and pay networks than on the major television networks of ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and the CW/WB. However, this growth in the number of lesbian and gay characters on network television does not necessarily signal the end of heterosexism (Dow, 1998 & 2001; Gross, 2001; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Bergman, 2004).

The Epiphany Season

As eighties conservatism gave way to nineties liberalism, the landscape began to change. Narratives involving lesbian relationships became more prevalent in the workplace and social lives of heterosexual characters. Lesbian characters began to populate prime-time in the mid 1990s cropping up as peripheral or supporting characters in dozens of shows. These characters and couples occupied recurring roles in many episodic television dramas and situation comedies including *L. A. Law, Mad About You, ER, Hearts Afire, Friends, Roseanne, Relativity, Sisters, Party of Five*, and *NYPD Blue.* Most often assuming the roles of ex-wife, sister, friend, co-worker, or mother, these lesbian portrayals provided opportunities for the heterosexual characters to demonstrate their helpfulness or hipness (Becker, 2006). The episodes did not focus on the character's lesbian experience nor her reaction to the narrative situation. In essence lesbian characters achieved camera time and narrative status only until displaced by heterosexual privilege.

Lesbian themes serve a useful purpose "as a catalyst for heterosexual growth and understanding" (Shugart, 2003b, p. 69). Capsuto (2000) discusses the narrative device of using the homosexual character to "humanize" the conservative heterosexual character. The plot generally revolves around a conflict caused by homosexuality and the heterosexual's epiphany and subsequent acceptance of the homosexual character. According to Cooper (2003) "heterosexuals typically learn to love and understand homosexuals as people just like them" (p.517). Dow (2001) explains that the "heterosexism

governs…what it will and will not mean and how it does and does not matter" (p.131). The political is not validated as important until the heterosexual approves it as so (Dow, 2001).

A gay or lesbian wedding provides the perfect setting for the heterosexual epiphany and rescue narrative device. Since the mid-nineties gay weddings appear more often on television, but *Northern Exposure's* 1994 nuptials between local innkeepers Ron and Erick debuted the gay wedding theme in prime-time (Gross, 2001). *Roseanne* followed in 1996 with the marriage of Roseanne's business associate, Leon, and his partner, Scott. In both of these programs a reluctant groom expresses second thoughts about his wedding. In both instances a disapproving heterosexual comes to terms with the gay wedding, provides reassurance to the nervous groom, and the wedding takes place as planned. In effect, the heterosexual character "renders not only homosexuality but homophobia benign and palatable" (Walters, 2001, p. 184).

Friends repeats the theme a few weeks after the gay wedding on *Roseanne* (Capsuto, 2000) with a lesbian wedding. In the series Ross Gellar maintains an ongoing (platonic) relationship with his lesbian ex-wife, Carol, and her partner, Susan. Carol and Ross share custody of their infant son, Ben, providing the basis for much of the interaction of the lesbian characters with the main characters of the program. When Carol and Susan announce their wedding, Ross feels conflicted about the marriage of his ex-wife to her lesbian partner. The script choreographs Ross' acceptance of the wedding so that he achieves a measure of growth and ultimately retains his role of power within the narrative.

Researchers have heavily criticized the script for presenting “consumable bodies just like the presumably straight female bodies in women’s fashion magazines” (Ciasullo, 2001); “never really [having] anything gay going on” (Tropiano, 2002); and as an “exact replica of its heterosexual counterpart” (Walters, 2001). Kessler identifies the wedding as “ the final act of heterosexual privilege [solidifying] Carol and Susan as ideological members of dominant society” (p. 135.)

Friends provides a typical lesbian narrative in this 1996 episode, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding.” Pre-Ellen, this is the first program to boldly use the word “lesbian” in an episode’s title. The “friends” have gathered at Monica’s apartment. A distraught Carol enters lamenting about her parents refusal to attend her wedding. Because she and Susan argued over her distress about her parents’ reaction, she plans to cancel the wedding. Ross, who adamantly opposes the wedding, suddenly shakes his head, slaps his knee, and decides Carol and Susan should get married. He gives an eloquent speech about love prevailing over parental dissent. Carol submissively agrees, “You’re right. Of course, you’re right!” seemingly happy that Ross makes this decision for her.

At first glance the wedding scene appears to be a typical television wedding. However, a closer look unveils a scene weighted with heteronormativity in narrative and action. The wedding amounts to no more than a processional and a reception. The narrative removes almost all markers of lesbian sexuality and homosexual commitment.

The scene begins with various shots of the wedding guests greeting each other and talking in small groups. These groups include unnamed wedding

guests, but feature all of the friends as well as Marlo Thomas, playing Rachel's mother. In a subtle way the sanitation of the heterosexual images begins immediately before a word is spoken. Noticeably all of the guests are attired in muted earth tones or black with the exception of Thomas who wears a bright purple dress. Thomas, an icon of the "all-American girl" image, becomes the focal point of the camera drawing attention away from the presumptively lesbian guests.

The wedding begins as a string ensemble plays a classical prelude but not "The Wedding March." The wedding takes place in a reception hall rather than a church. The crowd lining the aisles turns to watch the processional as Monica enters pushing the infant Ben in his stroller. Susan follows with her parents. Her procession lasts barely four seconds--less than half the time devoted to Ben's entrance. Her father wears a formal military uniform complete with white gloves and hat bearing the insignia of a military officer. He smiles at Susan then charmingly at the other guests as he and Susan walk down the aisle. Susan's mother bears a faint smile with an almost resigned expression. As they walk, her head drops, and she looks toward the floor.

Carol enters on Ross' arm. The camera cuts to a two-shot of Joey and Chandler as they show their approval. When the camera cuts back to Ross and Carol, Carol nods in their direction as if to thank them for attending. The other guests do not warrant acknowledgement. The procession brings Ross' heterosexual growth full circle. Yesterday he refused to attend the wedding. Today he escorts Carol down the aisle to meet her lesbian bride. This idea

seems even more convoluted because Ross is Carol's ex-husband. He now gives her away as if she were his property. The "growth and epiphany" theme is repeated one last time as Ross and Carol reach Susan. Ross resists releasing Carol. She pulls her arm away from him. He ducks his head and smiles sheepishly again diverting attention away from the lesbian to the heterosexual male. He protects the patriarchy and disguises the homophobia. The narrative revels in his good deed rather than concentrating on the lesbian wedding.

At last the two brides stand in front of the minister dressed in their wedding finery. Both wear champagne colored dresses, and both tuck their long hair under tonish hats. Carol's gown is floor length cut low in the front and back. She wears a dainty chain around her slender neck. Susan's dress on the other hand is covered with a jacket buttoned up to her neck. She wears no jewelry.

As the ceremony begins, the camera cuts to a medium tight shot of the minister played by special guest star Candace Gingrich. The casting of Gingrich acts as a significant lesbian marker because she is the much-publicized lesbian half-sister of former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich. Dressed in a black vestment with a black stole, she wears the liturgical color for funerals and masses of the dead rather than white, the liturgical color for weddings. The absence of a collar leaves her authenticity as clergy ambiguous as does her gender. Her gender marks her as "other" insinuating that she is perhaps not a "real" minister or that a "real" minister—a clergy-MAN—might not perform a lesbian ceremony.

Framed over the shoulders of Carol and Susan, the shot of the wedding ceremony mimics the gaze of the wedding guests. Gingrich punctuates her phrases by turning her head to address the wedding guests directly instead of focusing on the brides. Her opening remarks leave no doubt about the homosexuality of the moment:

> “You know, nothing makes God happier than when two people, any two people, come together in love. Friends, family, we're gathered here today to join Carol and Susan in holy matrimony” (Abrams & Schlamme, 1996).

As she looks back to Carol and Susan, the shot changes to a medium shot of her view. She sees Carol and Susan with the guests behind them. The purple-clad Marlo Thomas stands out diverting the camera’s focus from the lesbian brides.

The wedding leaves no doubt as to the homosexuality of the moment, but the script quickly neutralizes the homosexuality. The use of the phrase “holy matrimony” in reference to the brides presents perhaps the single most homosexual act of the program. The viewing audience cannot mistake the intended meaning of this message. However, to soften the blow, Phoebe interrupts the narrative with an outburst of “Now I’ve seen everything!” This statement brings closure to an ongoing side plot—Phoebe’s inhabitation by the spirit of an elderly Jewish woman. The spirit wants to see everything before she can rest. This suspension of the ceremony deflects the emphasis from the homosexuality and restores the narrative to heteronormativity. The heterosexual Phoebe gestures for the ceremony to continue, and the scene fades to the reception. The climatic moment of the vows vanishes; the promise of a lesbian kiss evaporates. The wedding ceremony occupies a mere one minute and thirty

seconds of the roughly twenty-two minutes available in a half-hour situation comedy.

The wedding reception also holds the promise of a substantial lesbian narrative. The scene begins with a tight shot of the wedding cake distinctively topped by two brides, but the soundtrack playing the romantic standard, *Strangers in the Night*, undercuts this vision. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Carol and Susan dancing closely once again reinforcing the lesbian narrative. They have discarded their wedding hats, and Susan has removed her jacket. Her long curly hair cascades over her shoulders and her bare arms wrap seductively around Carol. Carol pats Susan's arm as they sway to the music. They hug and preen for the photographer taking candid photographs of them. These images, although on the screen for a brief three seconds, leave no doubt about their representation of a lesbian couple enjoying an intimacy generally reserved for heterosexual couples.

Once displayed however, each decidedly homosexual image meets with an abrupt dismissal. As Carol and Susan dance, the camera reveals not the photographer or the camera (and thus the audience) looking at the couple but Monica and Ross. They control the gaze of the scene. This relieves the viewer's anxiety about looking at the lesbian image. The scopophillia becomes acceptable because Monica and Ross peer at the image. The camera cuts back to a medium tight shot as Susan steps behind Carol. They hug as the photographer snaps a photo. Again the camera cuts away; this time to Joey and Susan's father. The stark image of the father's military uniform, Joey's suit, and even the

waiter's jacket and tie negates the image of the lesbians and reinforces the patriarchal approval of and participation in the event.

Dow (2001) points to a set of rules for sympathetic lesbian portrayals. Most lesbian portrayals occur "as one time appearances rather than as integral elements or regular characters"(Dow, 2001, p. 129). Additionally, homosexuality presents an obstacle or a predicament requiring resolution, which in turn provides the conflict necessary for the narrative. The focus remains on how lesbian sexuality affects the heterosexual characters in the narrative. However, echoing the findings of Fejes & Petrich (1993), Dow (2001) also notes the absence of any explicit lesbian sexuality in the narrative.

Television also absents any connection of the personal life of the lesbian to the political reality of the lesbian in the narrative (Shugart, 2003b). "Homosexual characters are rarely shown in their own communities, homes, or same-sex romantic relationships but are depicted in terms of their place in the lives of heterosexuals" (Dow, 2001, p. 129). Herman (2005) argues that the coming out of Ellen Morgan was far from militant or extreme. Much has been made of *Ellen's* groundbreaking coming out episode, but as Hubert (1999) details even Ellen DeGeneres claims not to be political. *Ellen* depicts Ellen Morgan, the character, in her world and in her community. However the world presented remains her heterosexual world—the world that she inhabited for over three seasons before coming out in 1997. Although Ellen Morgan reveals her lesbianism in the latter part of the fourth season of the show, the viewing

audience waits several episodes into the next season before seeing her in her own home interacting with her girlfriend, Laurie.

Much like *Ellen's* treatment of Ellen Morgan, *Friends* totally depoliticizes the sexuality of its lesbian characters in "The One with the Lesbian Wedding." When Carol becomes indecisive and decides to cancel her wedding to Susan, she possesses no political referent for her homosexuality. The narrative takes her completely out of her lesbian community to deal with her very lesbian issue. She chooses instead to seek the advice of her ex-husband, Ross, and her ex-sister-in-law, Monica. Carol speaks about her parent's decision not to attend her lesbian wedding and displays her own internal homophobia. She laments, "I knew they were having trouble with this *whole thing*, but they're my parents . . ." (Abrams & Schlamme, 1996). She cannot even name her lesbianism. Susan seems noticeably absent from the scene. The audience does not see what transpired between Susan and Carol to bring Carol to this moment of indecision. The script makes no mention of any connection to her lesbian friends, who later attend the wedding. Walters (2002) notes "isolation and assimilation are often the price of tokenism" (p. 185).

Despite these limitations certain shifts take place. Viewers began seeing lesbian characters interacting in their own homes. In addition to Carol and Susan from *Friends* a 1997 episode of *NYPD Blue* featured lesbian detective Abby Sullivan and her partner, Kathy, entertaining a fellow officer (and potential sperm donor) at their home. A 1997 episode of *Mad About You* showed Debbie Buchman and her partner, Joan, in bed together. In the very matter-of-fact

portrayal the phone rings late at night, Joan answers, and hands the phone to the sleeping Debbie beside her (GLAAD, 1997). In 2000 *ER*'s Kerry Weaver and her girlfriend, Kim Legaspi, spend the night together. The viewer sees Kerry wake up at Kim's apartment. In a later season Kerry and her partner, Sandy Lopez, live together and eventually have a child together.

Recuperation themes persisted and visibility did not necessarily mean viability. The *NYPD Blue* plot was resolved when Abby's deranged ex-girlfriend hires a thug to murder Kathy at the beginning of the next season, and Abby ambiguously moves "upstate" leaving the show. Likewise, Sandy Lopez, a firefighter, is killed in the line of duty at the beginning of the next season of *ER*. Debbie and Joan from *Mad about You* remain one of the few lesbian couples to endure throughout a show's network run.

Kiss Me

The lesbian kiss became an early marker of the networks' progressivism. The first lesbian kiss in prime-time occurred in a 1990 episode of *21 Jump Street* on the Fox network. In "Change of Heart" (Ashford, 1990) female police officer, Judy Hoffs, goes undercover at a high school to investigate the murder of a teacher. A sexually-confused female student kisses Detective Hoffs and then bolts from the scene. The camera lingers on Hoffs as she shows her surprise with three reactions. She places her hand over her mouth, blinks her eyes incredulously, and then shakes her head in disbelief. She later discusses the kiss with her superior officer, but not with the student. The remaining narrative ignores the kiss as if it did not happen.

The next lesbian kiss in network prime-time appeared the following year on NBC's *L. A. Law*. Tropiano (2002) notes it as very chaste kiss between the bisexual, C. J., and the heterosexual Abby. Capsuto (2000) describes the kiss as "tender, sweet, and brief" (p. 274). Their lesbian encounter amounts to no more than this moment. The women share one innocent date later in the season during which C. J. ends the fledgling relationship abruptly and with no real explanation. At the end of the season Abby leaves the show (Capsuto, 2000) and by the beginning of the next season C. J. happily dates a man (Dow, 2001). This plot device removes any hint of the lesbian or lesbianism from the narrative.

Roseanne presented the next lesbian kiss in the 1994 episode "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (Heffernan, 2005). The very heterosexual Roseanne visits a gay bar with her best friend, Nancy and Nancy's girlfriend, Sharon. During the evening, Sharon kisses Roseanne. The media hype preceding the episode grew as the airdate neared (Gross, 2001). Noted film actress, Mariel Hemingway, guest starred as Sharon bringing another level of interest to the program. However, the screen images amounted to very little as the viewing audience sees only the back of Sharon's head as she kisses Roseanne. The camera focuses on Roseanne's reaction to the kiss. "We see Roseanne's distaste as she rolls her eyes and wipes her mouth on her sleeve" (Gross, 2001, p. 90).

In the late 90s the lesbian kiss became more common in prime-time appearing in episodes of *Picket Fences, Ally McBeal, Ellen, Party of Five,* and *Mad about You* (Heller, 2004; Heffernan, 2005). However, lesbian kisses most often functioned as a sensational plot device to garner ratings. The televised

lesbian kiss followed a formulaic structure. It almost always involved at least one heterosexually-marked woman, and the narrative minimized the kiss as an experiment (Capsuto, 2000). The lesbian kiss like other markers of homosexuality surfaced more often as a tool of heteronormativity than as an exploration of lesbian identities. Lesbian characters especially those participating in on-screen kisses rarely survived in entertainment television narratives. For the most part lesbian kisses allowed the heterosexual character an opportunity to experiment with and then to reject lesbian sexuality.

Two notable exceptions include the kisses shared between Ellen Morgan and her girlfriend, Laurie, in the 1997 *Ellen* episode, “Just Coffee” and between Debbie Buchman and her partner, Joan, in the 1998 episode of *Mad about You*, “Fire at Riff’s.” The *Ellen* kiss occurs as Ellen and Laurie discuss their promising relationship. The *Mad about You* kiss follows a dramatic scene in which Debbie and Joan were separated during a fire at a restaurant. When they locate each other outside the evacuated restaurant, they declare their love for each other and embrace. Both scenes evince a deepening connection between the lesbian partners and hold the promise of additional intimacy in their relationships.

By 2000 the networks’ sensitivity changed somewhat. During *ER*’s 2001 season, Dr. Kerry Weaver shared not one but two sensual kisses in front of the camera with her partner, firefighter Sandy Lopez. The kisses appeared in separate episodes airing outside of the February ratings period. Both scenes tied into the ongoing narrative of Dr. Weaver’s struggle with her coming-out process. During the final season of *The West Wing* in 2006 two female campaign staffers

kiss in a hotel bar as they exit the scene after sharing a nightcap with coworkers. While the characters play only minor parts in the narrative, the kiss bore no indicators of heterosexuality and occurs very matter-of-factly as the characters in the scene pair off for the evening. “It was a complete non-event, and that was the best part” (Warn, 2006).

However, more contemporary lesbian kisses on prime-time network television follow the established pattern. In the 2008 season of ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*, Dr. Callie Torres and Dr. Erica Hahn began their relationship by sharing several on-screen kisses. During the story arc both characters discussed how this experience marked the first time they had questioned their heterosexuality. After much sensationalism, the fledgling relationship was abruptly terminated when the producers fired the actress playing Dr. Hahn seven episodes into the season. By season’s end Callie has engaged in a new lesbian relationship with Dr. Arizona Robbins and they share several onscreen kisses. However Arizona remains in a guest-starring role leaving the status of the relationship ambiguous.

Butching It Up

With lesbian characters prevalent in network prime-time programming the interest turns to “how” the lesbian appears on the screen. The actual images seen on the screen remain more important than the number of times lesbian characters surface on television (Cragin, 2006). “To be sure, representation promises visibility, but visibility means that not only one is present, but that one is being watched. It also means that certain images get singled out as watchable”

(Ciasullo, 2001, p. 584). The lesbian image presents itself for consumption, but not necessarily the consumption of the lesbian viewer. Network television sanitizes or heterosexualizes the lesbian image making it palatable for the viewing audience (Ciasullo, 2000; Shugart, 2003b). The lesbian image is recuperated and her sexuality resolved (Moritz, 1994).

Ciasullo (2001) notes the dichotomy of heterosexualizing the lesbian body to make it desirable to the audience while "de-homosexualizing" (p. 578) the lesbian image to cover up the female-to-female desire. This cleansing of the lesbian image all but eradicates the butch image—trotting it out occasionally as a stereotype to be mocked and ridiculed, but stripping it of any cultural significance to the lesbian community. "There is a component of unfemininity, non femaleness, that characterizes the butch" (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 581). The mediated lesbian is white, thin, blond, (Ciasullo, 2001) and available for male consumption. The butch maintains no connections to or usefulness in the narrative because of her lack of serviceability as a commodity for male gaze. She challenges the phallocentric culture (Ciasullo, 2001).

This depiction nullifies most chances for the lesbian, especially the lesbian of color, to fit into societal notions of woman as seen through the television lens. Television fails to accurately fill the "information gap about the 'Other' " (Holtzman, 2004, p. 109). Television generally promotes acculturation and solidifies "the dominant as normative and 'others' as different" (Reed, 2005, p. 25). The feminized lesbian's acceptability and/or desirableness result from the capacity to be "perceived as inauthentic" (Ciasullo, p. 599). She might not be a

lesbian. She looks like a heterosexual and acts like a heterosexual. The butch on the other hand is “marked lesbian” (Ciasullo, p. 602) making her more visible and more apt to be ridiculed.

Most television shows featuring a lesbian couple position one of the partners as butch through masculizination of the character. Narrative devices such as cross-dressing or deepening the voice, hint at butchness in the characterizations (Doty, 1993). In *Friends* Susan provides a solid example of the butch role deemed necessary in television’s normalized image of the lesbian couple. Susan occupies the masculine positioning the narrative. She directs Carol to tell Ross about their upcoming wedding. When she and Carol depart for their first weekend without the baby, the script suggests that Susan selected the destination for their weekend away. Susan organizes and packs Ben’s things when they pick him up, and she carries the bags instead of the baby. Even when Ross hands her the baby in his carrier instead of the bags, Susan does not hold Ben. Instead, she carries him in his baby carrier.

As per Ciasullo’s (2001) discussion on the threat of the butch image, Susan cannot be so butch as to offend the viewing audience. A mop of curly hair, an image contrary to the cropped style usually stereotypically associated with lesbianism, softens her look. *Friends* makes one other effort to include a token butch image by featuring lesbian comic, Lea Delaria, as a wedding guest at Carol’s and Susan’s wedding. To signify her identity as butch, Delaria wears a masculine gray business suit with a vest and a white shirt buttoned to her neck but no tie. Her caricatural apparel contrasts with Chandler’s tailored suit and

trendy tie. Her hair slicked back, she swaggers into the frame between Chandler and Phoebe, stuffs her hands into her pockets, and interrupts their conversation to suggestively make advances to Phoebe. After the show aired, Delaria, herself, joked about the conspicuous absence of the butch image at the lesbian wedding saying, “They needed at least thirty or forty more fat dykes in tuxedos” (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 588; Walters, 2001, p. 183).

The portrayals of lesbians on television create a constant clash of conflicting images. The danger of nonconformity results in exclusion from the narrative and therefore loss of access and benefit. Stereotypes and ridicule essentially bar the lesbian from participation in her narrative. This in turn reinforces the closet of homosexuality, and prime-time network television unquestionably plays a role. American television is saturated with highly charged images of sexuality produced by a vastly white, male, heterosexual Hollywood production machine with a wealthy upper class mentality. Yet the lesbian images emanating from Hollywood are based on a perspective of homosexuality as other—as a stereotype to be consumed through derision and victimization or as a secret to be exposed. The heterocentrism of entertainment television constrains alternative views on sexuality especially as it relates to gender and race thus mediated images of lesbians hold much rich data for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation explores the lesbian image as presented on network television using particular examples from the mid to late 1990s. A postmodern feminist lens readily lends itself to this task. Feminist perspectives begin with the

notion that women are marginalized and oppressed in a patriarchal society. Feminist theory seeks to expose this systematic patriarchal oppression and thus liberate women from it (Kaplan, 1992; Olesen, 2005).

Feminist theory comes in all shapes and sizes and has many variations. The liberal feminists wanted equality regardless of gender. They felt women's oppression was rooted in sex discrimination and in a failure to recognize the female potential. Their goal was equal participation in the mainstream (Kaplan, 1992; Rosser, 2005). They sought equal opportunity in the political machinations of law, employment, education, and reasoned argument.

Groups such as the Redstockings and the Lavendar Menace grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. These radical feminists believed oppression was grounded in reproduction, mothering, and sexuality as well as gender. Theirs was a more political focus recognizing a dichotomy between the sexes (Kaplan, 1992). In the radical feminist view men are positioned as violent, aggressive, and seeking to dominate. In contrast, women seek to nurture. Radical feminists, too, challenged the exclusion of the female experience in scientific knowledge (Rosser, 2005).

The Marxist feminists focused on class division as it pertained to women's work and self-perceptions. Individuals were seen only in the context of production, and therefore, women's oppression was reduced to class (Kaplan, 1992). The Marxist feminists challenge capitalism as opposed to challenging outright sexism.

The womanist or African-American feminists held that black women are inherently valuable in society, but that they were the only people who cared enough to consistently work for their liberation (Combahee River Collective, 1974). “Racism intertwines and reinforces differing aspects of capitalism and patriarchy” (Rosser, 2005, p. 5). The womanists’ focus was on their oppression and the ways in which they could overcome it.

Many other forms of feminisms and feminist theories exist including standpoint theory, cyberfeminism, postcolonial feminist theory, queer theory, and transgender theory. A common theme in feminist theories is some notion of self-reflexivity (Baber & Murray, 2001). Since all knowledge is socially constructed, many ways of knowing exist. The strength of postmodern feminist theory is in uncovering and harnessing this diversity of thought. Information frees individuals to move toward their potential (Baber & Murray, 2001).

Some researchers trace the beginning of postmodern feminist theory to the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida while others view their work as having no link to the female experience. Chafetz (1997, p. 99) notes, “The issues raised are not in any fundamental way different from those raised by many scholars who have worked in these traditions but have not been interested specifically in women or committed to feminism.” I tend to side with Chafetz and as such will not discuss their writings in this research. Instead, I turn to three early postmodern feminists: Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. A sampling of their ideas will loosely frame my arguments.

As with most postmodernists, Helene Cixous (1975) criticized the nature of all writing as too male-centered. She preferred to think of women's writing as crucial to women's struggle, and saw women as trapped in the phallocentric language of men. She described a type of female writing that took place in almost frenzied bursts as women incorporated writing into their other responsibilities of life (Cixous, 1975). "It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic-theoretical domination (Cixous, 1975, p. 353).

Luce Irigaray took the feminist argument one step further. She cautioned women to completely liberate themselves from male-oriented philosophies and perspectives (Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). She called for the creation of a totally female language. She felt sexuality and especially lesbian sexuality held great power in this new feminist world position. Irigaray (1985a, 1985b) encouraged women to reclaim, reappropriate, and re-employ men's sexualized images of women. Irigaray maintained that by subverting these male fetishisms, women can challenge the phallocentric nature of society.

Finally, Julia Kristeva is perhaps the most controversial of the postmodern feminists. Kristeva (1995) rejected the male/female binary altogether. She posits that humans move between the binary opposites on a continuum from male to female or female to male. Perhaps this Kristevian notion that sexuality is fluid is

what makes homosexuality in general and lesbianism in particular so threatening in prime-time network television.

Even with their diverse ideas of female voice and language, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva share an important commonality within the postmodern feminist theoretical discipline. They understand that no single experience is all encompassing and no meaning is universal. Each woman must develop her own voice in order to write her own truth.

In postmodern feminist theory all reality is socially constructed (Baber & Murray, 2001; Olesen, 2005; Rosser, 2005). Certainly television images play into and present a manifestation of that belief. Media representations are contrived using stereotypes, sexualizations, and subtexts that compromise the female image. An early criticism of media images by the contemporary feminist movement maintained that television limited depictions of women to wife, mother, housekeeper, or sex object (Casey et al, 2008). Whatever the depiction, women were placed in the narrative to serve or be consumed by others and predominately by white males.

Furthermore, postmodern feminists reject positivism (Baber & Murray, 2001; Olesen, 2005) and the science that has emanated from empirical studies believing it to be knowledge made by men about men. Postmodern feminist theory disavows scientific knowledge not because it is invalid, but because it neglects or silences the female voice and therefore holds no authenticity for women. A multiplicity of female voices replaces this notion of one absolute scientific voice. No singular voice can or should cover the female experience

(Harding, 1987; Rosser, 2005). “The postmodern feminist push to acknowledge within-group diversity and to consider the experiences of those whose sexuality has been ignored or misrepresented and leads us to seek out more inclusive information and bring in the voices of those in marginal groups” (Baber & Murray, 2001, p. 24).

Deconstruction is a core tenet of the postmodern feminist approach (Baber & Murray, 2001). To encompass a diversity of voice requires an interest in how meaning is formed and how language and signs are developed and employed. In negotiating or decoding media messages the semiosis of the narrative becomes pivotal. Understanding the basis of how meaning attaches to a sign, or in other words, the semiotics involved, allows both media creator and media consumer to be active participants in defining and making sense of media messages. This becomes the true extension of Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1959) notion of combining a sound-image with some abstraction to form the signified.

Thus in postmodern feminist theory language may be the key to knowledge. Language in the case of television extends beyond the boundaries of words or word phrases. In a televised world language becomes pictures, sound, camera framing, and movement. Language is the pace of a scene’s direction and the delivery of an actor’s lines. Language is portrayed with location, lighting, set decorations, and wardrobe. Just as words combine to create a sentence, a paragraph, or a coherent thought, multiple elements come together in television to communicate some depiction of reality. Focusing on the deconstruction of meaning and stripping away preferred meanings, enables oppositional meanings

to emerge. Here, the receiver can accept or reject any part of the message and negotiate a more personally relevant meaning in the message. This allows a range of valid interpretations to surface.

A postmodern feminist approach to lesbian representations on television calls for deconstruction of the images. The first step is to identify the signs and symbols of those representations. Next, it is important to relate the signifiers to socially constructed concepts of sexuality, as well as race, ethnicity, and class. Breaking down the taken-for-granted assumptions about lesbians and lesbianism leads to a better picture of the categories and metaphors used to create these images. It is impossible to examine the representation of “lesbian” without first deconstructing that which is “lesbian” and the intersections of her multiple and often diverse identities.

Feminist theory is not without its limitations. While postmodern feminist theory remains applicable to this work, a major gaffe runs through the literature. Postmodern feminist theory remains somewhat guilty of the same infraction that it rails against. Although claiming to empower the female voice, it negates the voices of women who fall outside of the white middle-class experience. Unless we pay attention to the raced, gendered, and classed system behind the production of the media messages, nothing will change. The portrayals sanctioned by the white male elite producing the media messages will continue to populate the airwaves.

Research Questions

Using feminist theory as a guide, certain questions begin to unfold. The postmodern lens points to a qualitative approach for deconstructing mediated images. Keeping that in mind, I offer the following research questions for this dissertation:

> How does prime-time broadcast television depict lesbian characters in situations comedies and episodic dramas?
>
> How is the lesbian couple dynamic portrayed in situations comedies and episodic dramas on prime-time broadcast television?

Sub questions played an important role in focusing these topics. In most programming studies genre can impart meaning to a program, therefore narrowing the program scope to situation comedy and episodic drama was important. Likewise the broadcast window and the broadcast outlet place restrictions on program content.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory study of the text and images portraying lesbians on broadcast television. Tallying the number of lesbian characters or the references to lesbianism occurring during the prime-time broadcast window provides an overall snapshot of the percentage of shows featuring lesbian characters, but it cannot gauge the depth of those characterizations. Nor can it delve into how the viewer might engage with or read those characterizations. This work attempts to fill that gap by employing a qualitative approach to probe deeper into the text.

Using textual analysis allows greater flexibility in enabling the underlying meanings in media texts to surface. Media producers and media consumers impose their own individual limitations on media messages. Media technologies constrain certain messages as well. Textual analysis can be very effective in expanding those boundaries. “By asking new questions and coming up with new ways of thinking about things, you can get different kinds of knowledge” (McKee, 2001, p.140).

As important as what this analysis and method attempts to achieve is what it does not attempt to offer. Textual analysis cannot and does not produce one, definitive, all encompassing interpretation of a media text. Echoing McKee’s notion, at the outset new, additional information comes into view, and in a postmodern feminist world this novel interpretation makes a significant contribution.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis requires the dissection of television programs scene-by-scene to expose any underlying meaning embedded in the narrative, wardrobe, casting, and mise en scene of a program. For television the mise en scene encompasses every detail of program production including camera blocking, lighting cues, and set decoration. Textual analysis and more specifically a study of the semiosis of a program holds the potential of revealing patterns in tone, depiction, plotline, and placement of lesbian characters within the television narrative.

No one “right” way to do textual analysis proves superior (McKee, 2001). Choosing texts, interpreting these texts, and finally drawing conclusions is a very individualized process that varies with the individual researcher. However, true critical analysis results in more than just reinforcing the researcher’s existing ideas (Deacon, et al, 1999). Textual analysis exposes previously unseen meanings embedded in a media text and gives voice to unique interpretations of the text.

Peering beneath the surface text and “getting at” the deeper meaning of a media text and its images accomplishes the goal of textual analysis. However, too much analysis shares the same flaws as too little critical analysis. Overanalyzing may result in increased researcher bias and loss of perspective. Deacon et al (1999, p. 180) recommend “looking methodologically before leaping imaginatively.” McKee (2001) also warns against allowing semiotics to merely reiterate an existing interpretation using scientific language. Considering the

context of a text provides clues to the producer's intended message as well as bringing out implied meanings. Textual analysis does not identify a right and a wrong perspective (McKee, 2001). Positive and/or negative meanings do not exist in textual analysis due to lack of a causal mechanism.

Easy access to media texts creates countless opportunities for textual analysis (Stokes, 2003). The major studios frequently release programs on DVD at relatively low costs. More and more media networks make their programs available online or through video on demand services. Web interfaces such as YouTube, Hulu, and Joost offer Flash media versions of many current broadcast and cable network shows and resurrect old favorites as well. Individual viewers upload clips of their favorite shows or share programs through peer-to-peer networks adding even more access to media texts.

The reader, or in the case of television, the viewer or media consumer, also shares easy access to media texts. Television pervades our social phenomena (Stokes, 2003) and vernacular, making media texts relevant to both media consumer and media researcher. Broadcast markets reach all but the most remote locations in America. The researcher can reasonably expect the reader to share the same social reality and familiarity with televised programs (Stokes, 2003). However, this general familiarity with television programming in no way exempts the researcher from clearly and accurately describing the media text.

Textual analysis of media messages also has drawbacks. The process consumes a great amount of time (Stokes, 2003) and labor; sometimes for little

return. At the terminus, the analysis produces an interpretive, subjective report (McKee, 2001; Stokes, 2003). It holds no promise of extensibility (Stokes, 2003) to entire populations nor necessarily to television programs overall. “It cannot make safe assertions about the intentions of a text’s producer, nor can it validly infer the impact of the text on readers, viewers, or listeners” (Deacon, et al, 1999). No one universal meaning of a media representation exists (Creeber, 2006; McKee, 2001). Affected by the researchers own personal bias, a textual analysis remains one researcher’s account of a media message. Finally, textual analysis like most research methodologies sometimes fails to fully encompass the intersecting identities of race, class, culture, and sexuality in our society.

Textual analysis involves the peeling away of layers of a text to get at the underlying meaning, and semiotics provides one of the best approaches for revealing meaning. Semiotics delves deeper than a mere recognition of a representation in a narrative. It accounts for more than a roll call of characters or character representations (van Zoonen, 1994) and thus provides an excellent protocol for studying minority representations in media texts. Analysis of homosexual themes should extend deeper than tallying the number of lesbian and gay characters appearing on television (Avila-Saavedra, 2005). Probing into the symbolism in these televised characterizations uncovers valuable clues that can be used to decode the narratives.

Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs (Larsen, 1991; Stokes, 2003; Casey et al, 2008). More specifically semiotics is the study of how meaning attaches to a sign. A sign or seme represents the most basic component of

meaning, (Casey et al, 2008; Deacon et al, 1999; McKee, 2001). Through signs we construct our social reality. Thus, meaning results as a product of personal deduction or presumption based on among other influences heritage, socioeconomic class, and culture. Nature does not instill meaning; culture engenders meaning (Casey et al, 2008). Semiotics "addresses ways in which the various elements of a text work together and interact with our cultural knowledge to generate meaning" (Stokes, 2003, p. 72).

Semiotics traces back to the work of Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who saw signs as interrelating parts of a communication system (Larsen, 1991; Deacon et al, 1999). Saussere (1959) asserted that meaning cannot exist without some relationship among signs. "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (Saussure, 1959). Language consists of a series of word signs that hold meaning only in the context of other word signs (Deacon et al, 1999; van Zoonen, 1994). For instance, the most basic relationship between signs is binary opposites (Berger, 1989). To be exactly what another is not gives distinct and incontrovertible meaning to a sign. In the case of television programming these signs or codes instruct the viewer how to receive or make sense of the media message.

To convey meaning in this system of signs, some artifact becomes a signifier for the signified. In the semiotic view the outward physical form, or signifier, imparts meaning to the signified (Saussure, 1959). The signifier may present as some combination of sound and image or as a word or object (Saussure, 1959). The signifier "is that part of the sign which consists of the

actual material artifact, act, or image which holds the potential of signifying. This potential is fulfilled when it connects with the signified." (Deacon et al, 1999, p. 137). The signified then is the associated meaning (Saussure, 1959; van Zoonen, 1994), the understanding (Berger, 1989) or comprehension of the signifier. "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (Saussure, 1959, p. 67). The signified promises no universal conveyance (Deacon et al, 1999) as meaning is often culturally specific. For example, "football" in the United States means a sport played with an oval shaped pigskin ball while "football" in most other countries refers to what Americans call soccer. The signifier and the signified in conjunction complete the sign. The production elements of a television program act as signifiers denoting meaning to the viewer.

Roland Barthes (1957), building on Saussere's notions, focused on how producers convey meaning and how audiences consume this meaning (Stokes, 2003). His research centered on the ways words and images work conjunctively to impart meaning—to both constrain and expand construal as signifiers. This idea of meaning as implication or assertion leads to an exploration of denotative and connotative meanings. Denotation suggests the more literal or dictionary definition (Casey et al, 2008) or the manifest content of a sign (Deacon et al, 1999). The denotative meaning blatantly or intentionally names the symbol outright. The word "lesbian" denotes a homosexual woman, and thus creates an expectation that the character might romantically partner or couple with another woman in the program narrative. In contrast, connotation is the implied, (Stokes, 2003) the metaphorical or philosophical meaning (Casey et al, 2008), or the

latent meaning (Deacon et al, 1999) of the signifier. A female television character dressed in mannish clothes, sporting a severely cropped hairstyle, and walking with an exaggerated stride stereotypically connotes a lesbian character.

Media semiotics can be approached from three unique views—producer, audience, and revenue. The media producer creates semes or signs in the production of the media message. The audience develops yet another set of semiotic cues when deconstructing/reconstructing the media message in consumption of it. Deconstruction, a basic tenet of postmodern feminist production, requires the viewer to link constructs relevant to their experience with images and texts projected by media producers. Ultimately, this deconstruction may lead to the viewer discarding the producer's intended meanings altogether and adapting a reading more applicable to the viewer's personal insights. Thirdly, the political economy of producing a television program that generates a profit adds yet another focus for semiotic framing (Deacon et al, 1999).

Producers, directors, scriptwriters, and actors impart specific meanings to the media messages they produce. The viewer in turns interprets the media message and reads perhaps a different meaning into the text. Certainly my experience as a fifty year old, white lesbian informs my reading of the media texts in this analysis. Incongruity between the implied message of the media creator and the inference of the media consumer lies at the nucleus of semiotics (Stokes, 2003) and at the center of this work.

Also at the heart of this work is an exploration of the context surrounding or contained within the media text. Textual analysis requires a deconstruction of

meaning and a stripping away of preferred or intended meanings favoring instead oppositional or negotiated readings. Without first deconstructing that which is "lesbian" and the intersections of her multiple identities, examination of lesbian representations remains challenging if not impossible. In deconstructing images the scrutiny begins with identifying the signs and symbols in the mediated representation. Next, relating those signs and symbols to socially constructed concepts such as race, culture, sexuality, and class strengthens the inquiry by delving beneath the denotative elements of a scene. Finally, breaking down the taken-for-granted assumptions relating to homosexuality and femaleness leads to a better illustration of the categories and metaphors used to create media images of lesbians.

Using this approach it seems clear that many different voices and variations in the lesbian image emerge. It is also safe to foster an expectation that these multiplicities will change over time. Because all meaning is socially constructed, it is impossible to offer one universal meaning of a representation. Despite the intended meanings, television images are presented for and read by the individual viewer. Consequently, the viewer can choose to accept the personally relevant parts of a media message but reject or re-negotiate other parts of the message.

The Programs

This analysis focuses as much as possible on recurring character portrayals in situation comedies and episodic dramas. A list of programs airing

between 1963 and 2007 that featured lesbian characters was drafted and served as the initial starting point for this analysis. This list began with personal recollections of lesbian themed episodes and grew exponentially with information from the Capsuto (2000) and Tropiano (2002) texts. Other sources of program titles include Sarah Warn's website, afterellen.com, and David Wyatts' list of programs featuring lesbian, gay, and bisexual television characters maintained at http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wyatt/tv-characters.html.

Narrowing down this list of programs presented quite a challenge. Each provided a telling story in the history of media representations of lesbian characters. Whether presented with rich details or as merely passing references, each characterization holds a place in pop culture. Two programs from the mid-1990s were chosen for this analysis: ABC's *NYPD Blue* and NBC's *Mad about You*. Representing both the situation comedy and the episodic drama these two series provide recurring characters that span across at least one season.

NYPD Blue

During the 1996-97 season, ABC featured recurring lesbian characters in two episodic dramas, *NYPD Blue* and *Relativity*. Also in this season *Roseanne* featured at least one lesbian character in a recurring role, and in May 1997 the character, Ellen Morgan, came out in the season finale of *Ellen*. Although these programs aired during the same period, the episodic police drama *NYPD Blue* was chosen for this analysis. *Relativity* was a new series searching for an audience and was cancelled at the end of the season. *NYPD Blue*, on the other hand, was entering its fourth season. It boasted an established audience and

was a ratings leader in its time slot. The *NYPD Blue* portrayal provides a cogent example for comparison with benchmarks from earlier police dramas such as *Police Woman* and *Hunter*. The recurring lesbian character, police officer Abby Sullivan, was featured in nine of twenty-two episodes airing during season four of the program. The termination of her storyline in the third episode of season five clearly delimits episodes for analysis.

In her introduction in the first episode of season four Officer Abby Sullivan befriends fellow officer, Greg Medavoy. In the second episode of the season Abby shows Greg how to use the Stairmaster machine in the precinct's makeshift workout room. In her next appearance Abby literally jogs by the camera. She accompanies Greg on a run through the park giving her narrative status. She has no dialogue or other connection with the storyline. She merely functions as an extra in the scene.

Finally in the eighth episode of season four, "Unembraceable You," Abby tells Greg she is gay in response to his request for a dinner date. Six episodes further into season four and during the February ratings period Abby invites Greg to dinner mentioning a special occasion that might occur:

ABBY: I was interested to know if you might like to meet Kathy?

GREG: I assume Kathy's your uh, uh, uh significant other?

ABBY: My lover, that's right.

GREG: That's what I assumed. Uh, Uh, Uh well I'd certainly, uh, have no reason not to meet her. If the circumstance, uh, arose.

ABBY: I was hoping that we could have you for dinner some night at our apartment.

When Greg asks if meeting Kathy is the special occasion she spoke of, Abby suggests they "take it one step at a time." Two episodes later we learn that the special occasion is an opportunity for Greg to be a sperm donor for Abby and Kathy. The special occasion plotline culminates during the May ratings period when Greg delivers his sperm to the hospital where Abby waits to be inseminated. The next time Abby and Kathy appear in the program is five months later in the third episode of *NYPD Blue's* fifth season. Kathy's murder in an apparent robbery at their apartment leaves a pregnant Abby to deal with her fellow officers. Table 1 lists the titles, airdates, and brief synopses of the scenes and episodes featuring Abby and/or Kathy.

Table 1. *NYPD Blue* Episodes.

Episode Title	***Airdate***	***Synopsis***
Moby Greg	10/15/1996	Greg and Abby meet
Thick Stu	10/22/1996	Abby helps Greg workout
Ted and Carey's Bogus Adventure	12/03/1996	Abby and Greg jogging
Unembraceable You Scene 1	12/10/1996	Greg asks Abby for date
Unembraceable You Scene 2		Abby and Greg have dinner
Taillight's Last Gleaming	02/18/1997	Abby invites Greg to dinner
What a Dump! Scene 1	02/25/1997	Abby and Greg on the job
What Dump! Scene 2		Abby and Greg have dinner
A Wrenching Experience	04/151997	Dinner Abby's and Kathy's
Bad Rap Scene 1	04/29/1997	Abby asks Greg for sperm
Bad Rap Scene 2		Greg consents
Emission Impossible Scene 1	05/06/1997	The specimen cup
Emission Impossible Scene 2		Insemination
Three Girls and a Baby Scene 1	10/14/1997	The crime scene
Three Girls and a Baby Scene 2		Abby's apartment
Three Girls and a Baby Scene 3		Killer dyke confession

Mad about You

NBC offers little in the way of recurring lesbian roles in episodic dramas aside from the role of Kerry Weaver as a lesbian doctor on *ER*. However, NBC featured multiple recurring lesbian portrayals in supporting roles in popular situation comedies. The juggernaut *Friends* featured Ross' ex-wife, Carol, and her partner, Susan, throughout the first two seasons of the program, but their portrayals waned as the show grew in popularity. Conversely, *Mad about You* introduced Paul Buchman's sister, Debbie Buchman, in a minimal role in season two. *Mad about You* details the lives of a young married couple, Paul and Jamie Buchman. Debbie is Paul's sister and is part of the supporting cast along with their parents, Sylvia and Burt, and cousin, Ira. In season four Debbie is reintroduced in a larger role and midway through the season comes out as a lesbian. In season five her partner, Dr. Joan, joins the show. In season six Robin Bartlett, who plays the role of Debbie, is billed as a series regular in the opening credit sequence. The characters of Debbie and Joan appear in ten episodes of season six. In season seven, Debbie makes two solo appearances and Debbie and Joan appear as a couple in two episodes. In the third episode of season seven, "Tragedy Plus Time," they argue and their status is left unresolved until their next appearance together in the series finale. Table 2 lists the titles, airdates, and brief synopses of the episodes featuring Debbie and and/or Joan.

In Debbie's first appearance, Talia Balsam plays her character. In her next appearance, the season two finale, Robin Bartlett assumes the role of Debbie. She continues in the role until the end of the series. Joan is identified by three

Table 2. *Mad about You* Episodes.

Episode Title	*Airdate*	*Synopsis*
An Unplanned Child	10/28/1993	Paul and Jamie babysit Debbie's son
With this Ring	5/19/1994	Debbie and Jamie have lunch
The Good, the Bad, and the Not So Appealing	10/29/1995	Debbie is invited to claim Sylvia's possessions
Ovulation Day	1/7/1996	Debbie comes out
Everybody Hates Me	3/10/1996	Debbie is the Buchman's accountant
Season 4 Finale	5/5/1996	Debbie helps plan anniversary party
Dr. Wonderful	9/17/1996	Debbie introduces Joan to the family
Burt's Building	10/29/1996	Paul and Jamie visit Dr. Joan
Outbreak	11/19/1996	Debbie cooks at Paul and Jamie's
Chicken Man	1/7/1997	Paul and Jamie visit Dr. Joan
The Penis	2/11/1997	Paul and Jamie visit Dr. Joan
Citizen Buchman	2/18/1997	Paul and Debbie's uncle dies
Her Houseboy Coco	2/25/1997	Dr. Joan orders bed rest for Jamie
On the Road	3/18/1997	Debbie helps plan Jamie's shower
Dry Run	4/29/1997	Debbie appears in Paul's film
Guardianhood	5/6/1997	Debbie and Joan named guardians
The Birth	5/2/1997	Debbie and Joan at Mabel's birth
Coming Home	9/23/1997	Debbie and Joan welcome Mabel
Letters to Mabel	9/30/1997	Joan rejects Ira's advances
Speed Baby	10/28/1997	Debbie and Joan appear in bed
Le Sex Show	11/25/1997	Debbie tangles with a pizza mascot
The New Friend	12/9/1997	Debbie is jealous of Paul's award
The Coin of Destiny	3/24/1998	Debbie takes advice from Paul
The Caper	3/31/1998	Debbie Joan attend Paul's birthday party
The Baby Video	4/14/1998	Debbie works on a film with Paul, etc.
Fire at Riff's	4/28/1998	Debbie an Joan get engaged
Mother's Day	5/5/1998	Debbie cooks at Paul and Jamie's
Tragedy Plus Time	10/27/1998	Debbie kisses Alan
The Thanksgiving Show	11/24/1998	Debbie joins the family for Thanksgiving
Separate Beds	5/3/1999	Debbie appears in Paul's dream
The Dirty Little Secret	5/17/1999	Debbie leads book discussion
The Final Frontier	5/24/1999	Series conclusion

names over the course of the show. In her first appearance she is billed as Dr. Joan Golfinos. Her next credit identifies her as Dr. Joan Herman. Finally in the seventh episode of season five in Joan's third appearance on the program the producers settle on "Dr. Joan" or just "Joan" for the remainder of her role.

Debbie and Joan are featured on *Mad about You* from 1995 through 1999. The episodes include Debbie's coming out narrative and detail her relationship with Joan. These episodes offer a distinct alternative to the much written about *Ellen* storylines appearing on both ABC and CBS. Because Debbie and Joan appear over the course of several seasons, their portrayals hold the promise of greater development than roles featured as single appearances or in limited story arcs and provide ample data for analysis.

Video Analysis Software

Transana

This work examines television representations of the lesbian image by deconstructing the contextual elements that surround these characters. Each scene featuring lesbian characters was carefully dissected to uncover meanings in wardrobe, casting, camera movement, and scripting. All scenes featuring lesbian characters were transcribed and notated using Transana video analysis software. The resulting data reports allowed comparison across episodes exposing and highlighting recurring themes in the narrative.

Episodes from *Mad about You* and *NYPD Blue* were screened to identify episodes featuring lesbian characters. Video of the lesbian-themed episodes was

imported into the Transana interface. Each episode was then transcribed to identify the specific scenes involving the lesbian characters. Transana allows scenes to be marked with time codes and detailed notes. Each scene was watched a minimum of four times in the Transana interface. During the initial screening the scenes were transcribed. On the second viewing time codes were marked. In the course of the third screening wardrobe details were recorded, and in subsequent viewings a general description of the action of the scene was noted.

In the coding process only one keyword was predetermined—the show's credit of the lesbian characters. Opening or closing credits could potentially place the lesbian characters in a certain narrative status, and I felt it was important to note this aspect in each episode. However, as all the lesbian characters were consistently billed as guest stars, the billing held no disproportionate placement of the lesbian characters in the narrative. In all episodes screened only one exception to the guest-star role was noted. In season six of *Mad about You* Robin Bartlett received a co-starring credit in her role as Debbie Buchman. Although her billing status had elevated, she continued to share the screen with Dr. Joan and the other series characters in the same fashion as when in her guest-starring role.

As details of each video clip were recorded in latter viewings, repeating themes began to emerge. At the end of the coding process the scenes were labeled with keywords and then organized into collections according to the themes. Table 3 identifies the keyword collections and provides a brief

description of each category. Collections receiving the most notations are discussed in this analysis.

Table 3. Keyword Collections.

Collection Title	***Description***
Anger/Fight/Spat	Any disagreement between the lesbian partners
At Home	Scenes featuring the partners in their own homes
Closet	Secretive behavior about their lesbianism
Cooking/Kitchen	Scenes centering around cooking or food
Crazies/Psychos	Mentally unstable or psychotic lesbians
Credits	Credits lesbian characters received
Girlfriend/Partner/Wife	Words used to describe lesbian partner/relationship
I'm Gay/Coming Out	Revealing lesbian sexuality
Jewish Mother	Stereotypical Jewish Mother
Jokes	Jokes made at the expense of lesbians
Kiss/Hug/ILY	Any sign of affection between the partners
Lesbian	Use of the word "lesbian"
Parental reaction	Reactions of family to lesbianism
Professional	Lesbian characters in their professional roles
Slurs/Stereotypes	Slurs against homosexuality
Snark	Lesbians acting sarcastically or petty
Wardrobe	Notes about the wardrobe of lesbian characters
Wife/Mother Roles	Lesbians performing or seeking out wife/mother roles

CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the use of images in prime-time network programming to portray lesbian characters. Scripting, wardrobe, and other narrative devices work intricately together to create a mediated image. These images must present as palatable to network censors, sponsors, the viewing audience, and the program's creators. This chapter dissects these images and attempts to explore the intricate details that make up the story of Abby and Kathy from *NYPD Blue* and the story of Debbie and Joan from *Mad about You.* The two narratives provide a look inside different approaches to presenting lesbian characters.

Sometimes the most loved characters are those that seem to just be—characters that float through the narrative seemingly unaffected by societal notions of propriety or the trappings of narrative convention. I am reminded of the bittersweet Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As a couple they represent a dilemma only for themselves as they struggle to keep each other's affections. The other characters in the series seem untouched by their romance.

Willow and Tara stand in stark contrast to Abby and Kathy from *NYPD Blue.* Abby and Kathy create a problem or conflict in the narrative. They create an awkward dilemma for Abby's coworker, Greg, who eventually becomes their sperm donor. They are problematic for the homophobic medical resident living

across the hall in their apartment building, and for the uniformed police officer investigating Kathy's murder. They create so much conflict for Abby's former girlfriend that she conspires to murder Kathy.

For the benefit of heterosexuals in the narrative the lesbian identity of Abby and Kathy requires scrutiny and eventually rejection. They are disrespected, judged, and finally eliminated from the narrative. Resolution belongs solely to the heterosexual character. The semiosis clearly draws the line for the viewer. Normal heterosexual narratives are civil, tightly scripted, and evenly paced while lesbian narratives are dark, terse, and stilted.

Debbie and Joan from *Mad about You* represent the other side of the coin. Here, the characters are so integrated into the script it is as if the narrative tries too hard to ignore the elephant in the room. They are so homogenized as to remove almost all markings of their lesbian identities. No one has any issues with their sexuality either personally or professionally. Debbie's mother, Sylvia, wants to throw herself out of window when she discovers her daughter is a lesbian. However, Dr. Joan, Debbie's partner, charms Sylvia and almost immediately wins her over:

> DEBBIE: Four years ago when I told you I was gay, do you remember your reaction… You tried to throw yourself out the window.
>
> SYLVIA: … I was devastated. I thought how could I lead my daughter down this misbegotten path. I believed as anyone might have that death was my only honorable exit…Then I met Joan. She's so pretty. She's nice. She's a doctor! Someone who loves you… I came to terms. I looked deep within myself, and I found the strength to accept. Oh no, more than just accept, I embraced.

Debbie and Joan assume a position of acceptance and tolerance in the narrative, but this tolerance comes with a price—the sanitization of their lesbian identities. Debbie and Joan take their places in the narrative as members of the larger Buchman clan, but they have no real connections to the outside world. They have no lesbian or gay friends or involvement in gay activities. Even when Paul mentions the gay pride parade in New York his reference is to traffic not to any participation in the parade by Debbie and/or Joan. While Debbie and Joan can name their sexuality, they must remain within their place. Debbie and Joan appear in the narrative only to support Paul and Jamie in their endeavors. They can act as doctor or accountant, guardian or cook, but cannot act independently of the heterosexual characters. They serve as the butt of stereotypical lesbian jokes, but do not challenge heterosexual norms.

Wardrobe

In the majority of mediated lesbian images at least one of the characters in a lesbian couple is presented as overwhelmingly butch. This overtly masculine caricature is detailed mostly through costuming although hypermasculine gaits, severely short hairstyles, and working class accents also contribute to the butch image. Mame from *Police Woman* represents of this timeworn cliché. *NYPD Blue* toys with the butch stereotype in presenting Abby, but *Mad about You* veers away from butchness as a narrative device.

While the grunge look passes as a fashion trend in the mid 1990s, Abby is the sole character on *NYPD Blue* to adopt this look. Abby almost always wears

some version of an oversized plaid shirt and jeans. Even when she dines with Greg at various upscale restaurants, she wears a rather sloppy plaid flannel shirt draped loose over a t-shirt. At the crime scene in “What a Dump!” she dons her usual plaid shirt and dark jeans. Her police badge on a lanyard around her neck identifies her as on official business. Her hair is messily pulled into a ponytail. She wears no visible make-up. Figure 1 illustrates Abby’s typical look.

Abby appears only once in a police uniform. In her second appearance on *NYPD Blue* in the episode “Thick Stu” Abby wears her police uniform when she

Figure 1. Abby

shows Greg how to operate the exercise equipment in a makeshift workout room at the police station. She approaches Greg with her police cap tucked neatly under her arm and adjusts the settings on the treadmill. This scene establishes her place in the narrative. Her uniform legitimizes her right to be at the precinct and to be knowledgeable about the activities going on in the station.

In her remaining appearances on the show, Abby's plaid flannel attire separates her from other officers in the precinct. The casualness of her wardrobe marks her as less than important and nullifies her authenticity as a professional. She appears not worthy of the uniform—not the official police blues or the stylish business suits worn by female detectives. She does not share the usual collegial relationship with a partnering officer. She actively works a crime scene in only one episode, and while at the crime scene she mentions her police partner. However, the partner does not appear on screen. In her other work scenes Abby enters or leaves the precinct or works quietly and in solitude at a desk. She holds no connection with other officers.

The sloppiness and shapelessness of Abby's clothing also points to the unkemptness and chaos of her lesbian life. Following Kathy's murder, she cannot provide an apt description of the suspect. She confuses her story. She leaves out important details that she later reveals to Greg when he prompts her for more information. The narrative presents Abby's disorganization as an ongoing trend and not a consequence of her grief over Kathy's murder. When Greg appears at her apartment with two bags of groceries, he says, "I just got what you usually ask for." His statement implies that Abby has regularly called on him to deliver

such basic necessities as groceries to her even before Kathy's death. Abby appears incapable of fending for herself.

The narrative in *NYPD Blue* sends mixed signals about Abby's placement as butch. Her dress borders on butch, but she readily assumes the wife and mother role in her relationships. She explains her reluctance to reveal her lesbianism to Greg. She feared that his knowledge of her sexuality might cause him to abandon his work out routine.

> ABBY: Was it a really big left turn for you finding out I was gay?
>
> GREG: I, I, I, uh won't deny I was somewhat surprised.
>
> ABBY: Well, I really hope that doesn't stop us from being friends.
>
> GREG: You know to be honest Abby, I feel like you, you, you could of told me earlier in our knowing each other. You know save me some awkwardness in my thinking.
>
> ABBY: Every time you came by the machines you were like a kid who was afraid of the water. You know, you were sort of looking to me for encouragement. I was worried that if I told you that I was gay it might scare you away from exercising.
>
> GREG: Aw
>
> ABBY: And then I thought I'd tell you and I'd stop using the machines for a while, but that was me ten years ago.
>
> GREG: Naw, that, thata wouldda been silly.
>
> ABBY: I sure hope we can get over this hurdle, cause I think you are a really nice person. And I enjoy spending time with you.

Abby manifests her maternal role throughout her narrative. She continues to help Greg with his work out, encouraging and almost cajoling him to stick to his diet. She brags to Greg about Kathy's writing skills and to Kathy about Greg's skills as

a detective. She asks Greg to be their sperm donor. She brings him a specimen jar and a wrinkled plastic shopping bag filled with “magazines” to help him perform his duties as sperm donor. Finally, she fulfills the ultimate maternal role as she carries the child.

Although she appears in only three scenes, Kathy presents a more polished image in contrast to Abby’s grunge look. Although not positioned in the mother role, Kathy’s character absorbs much of the femme role in the narrative. At the hospital waiting for Greg to deliver his sperm for the insemination, Kathy wears expensive-looking stylish slacks with a silk blouse and argyle sweater vest. She dresses fashionably and professionally. Her make-up looks natural and understated. When Abby and Kathy host Greg for dinner at their apartment, Kathy dresses more casually wearing chinos and a trendy vest over a knit sweater. She combs hair soft and curly. She wears dangly earrings adding to her femininity. Her chinos, however, contrast with Abby’s jeans. Figure 2 illustrates

Figure 2. Kathy

these images of Kathy. Kathy presents the opposite of Abby's rumpled look. She represents order and regularity further pushing Abby's unkemptness beyond the border of normalcy. Kathy's normalcy, however, proves short-lived. In her third appearance the viewer sees only her chino-clad legs protruding from beneath a white sheet covering her corpse. Her murder abruptly ends her narrative

In *Mad about You* wardrobe plays a lesser role in positioning Debbie and Joan as lesbians. The narrative in this case places less emphasis on stereotypical butch affectations and uses wardrobe to assert place and power. Rather than positioning Debbie and Joan as "other," wardrobe in *Mad about You* attempts to assimilate their characters assuring their sameness and making them identical to other female characters in the narrative. The producers also use costuming to signal the status given to Debbie or Joan within a scene and within the cast at large. However, they veer away from established stereotypes such a masculine or androgynous dress.

Debbie begins her role as a smartly dressed busy executive. In season two she joins Paul and Jamie for lunch with her son noisily in tow and a cell phone glued to her ear. Her next appearance comes in season three as a flashback to the Buchman's wedding. Here, Debbie wears a stylish black dress with dark hose and matching pumps as she arrives to try on her bridesmaid dress for the wedding. Still the busy professional and still a heterosexual, she rushes in lamenting about a fight with her husband that caused her lateness. Self-absorbed, she wonders aloud if marriage is worth it. Another bridesmaid, Fran, taken aback at this statement chides Debbie to turn her attention to Jamie,

the bride. Debbie's black dress indicates how different she is from the others. It contrasts with Jamie's white wedding gown and Fran's red blazer and jeans. In this case Debbie is the exact opposite of Jamie. Debbie in black is the angry bitter wife, and Jamie in white is the naïve new bride. Fran in her casual blazer and jeans has recently left her job to become a full-time wife and mother while Debbie's smartly-styled attire indicates her role as working woman. Figure 3 illustrates these images. In later episodes after Debbie's character comes out as a lesbian, her powerful workingwoman wardrobe vanishes.

Although the dress-fitting scene introduces Debbie as the exact opposite of the normal female role, it also points out how quickly recuperation to this role occurs in broadcast television. When she changes out of her black dress into a matching bridesmaid's dress, she transforms into an exact replica of the other women in the scene. Her demeanor changes. Her voice softens as she appropriately coos over Jamie's wedding gown. She joins the other bridesmaids

Figure 3. Debbie

in complaining about their dresses and in rejoicing when Jamie allows them to choose a different dress. The identical dresses and poses signal Debbie's homogeneity. She becomes just like the others.

In her next few appearances the professional theme continues to run through Debbie's wardrobe. She wears sophisticated suits or coordinating separates. She almost always wears delicate jewelry. Even when she announces her lesbianism to her family, her wide-legged maroon pants are nicely paired with an elegantly cut black blazer and blouse. A pendant softens her neckline and gold earrings adorn her ear lobes. She is very much the picture of femininity and fashion sense.

With the shift in Debbie's sexuality comes a shift in her costuming. As her role grows, she begins to appear less often in public settings. She appears at the Buchman's apartment numerous times and even in her own apartment on a couple of occasions. In these more informal settings her dress becomes more casual. Her wardrobe transitions from "power" suits to V-necked sweaters with long skirts or pants. Loose unstructured shirts or tunics conceal her figure. Long sleeves almost always cover her arms. In some episodes she looks conservative and almost matronly. Gone is the chic urban professional. In its place emerges the seemingly unemployed lesbian divorcee. Debbie's wardrobe normalizes her character making her bland and unnoticeable and obscuring signs of the confident, powerful, professional who matter-of-factly proclaimed her lesbianism.

Like Abby's grunge, Debbie's casualness strips her character of narrative control and potentially reduces her command of a scene. The producers seem

anxious to maintain the status quo with Debbie's character once she comes out. To create an air of familiarity, certain aspects of her wardrobe repeat across seasons. In season four following her coming out episode, she wears an oversized shirt with a white shell as she sorts through the Buchman's tax receipts. Two seasons later when she gets into an altercation with a mascot outside a pizza parlor, she wears the same shirt buttoned over a cream-colored mock turtleneck. In season five at the Buchman's Thanksgiving Day celebration she appears in a loose-fitting mauve jacket and black turtleneck. In season six she wears the same jacket and turtleneck in "Letters to Mabel." Finally in season seven in her last appearance before the series finale she pairs the jacket with a black dress. Debbie appears regularly over the course of the final four seasons of *Mad about You*. Yet, this costuming insinuates an inability of her character to evolve. Her wardrobe like her personal growth arrests at a particular stage and when faced with this inability to progress, it recycles.

Joan's dress varies between the white coat signifying her medical role as a doctor and her nonclinical attire. The viewer first sees Joan in her white doctor's coat. Her white coat gives her instant status as a medical expert, as an intellectual, and as a breadwinner. Much of Joan's wardrobe consists of soft textures such as velours and diaphanous chiffons. These soft textures make Joan seem to float as she moves around the screen. They intimate that she is sensitive and sympathetic in addition to smart and accomplished.

Her hairstyle also reinforces her roles as a professional and as a caring partner and compassionate friend. Joan wears her hair pulled back away from

her face when she wears her doctor's coat or when she is acting in a professional or formal role. Her face exposed, she commands the viewer's attention. When not dispensing doctorly advice, her long flowing red hair cascades down around her face to remind the viewer of her femaleness, her tenderness, and her warmth. Figure 4 depicts Joan's professional and femme fatale costuming.

Joan's wardrobe varies between pants and dresses. A dress usually indicates a major event in her storyline. She wears a dress when she meets Debbie's parents. She wears a dress for her photo shoot as one of New York's most eligible bachelorettes. She wears a dress when she and Debbie visit the Buchman's after Mabel's birth. Yet, at her engagement party she opts for pants instead. Figure 5 shows Joan and Debbie before and at their engagement party. Her wardrobe reinforces her control of the narrative that pertains to Debbie. Joan "wears the pants" in the relationship. Joan asked Debbie to marry her. Joan paid for the engagement party. Joan asked for the prenuptial agreement. Joan offers Debbie her checkbook and gives Debbie permission to take what she wants. Her pants like her name, Joan--a feminine version of John--indicate her position of power in the relationship with Debbie.

Wardrobe plays a significant role in the portrayal of lesbian characters. From Abby's flannel shirts to Dr. Joan's white coat costuming functions across a wide spectrum. At one end of the continuum costuming singles out lesbian characters as "other." At the other end wardrobe camouflages their lesbian identity eradicating sexuality and moderating power currencies in their narrative.

Figure 4. Joan

Figure 5. Debbie and Joan

The dress of lesbian characters operates as a primary signifier of their place in the mediated narrative and provides clues to reinforce these notions.

Haircolor

Blond hair is the television norm for the sexy, beautiful, feminine image in the 1990s. The characters in this analysis are distinct in one aspect from Ciasullo's (2001) notion of the televised lesbian as white, thin, and blond. Neither Abby, Kathy, Debbie, nor Joan has blond hair. The dark hair of the lesbian characters identifies them as "other" in multiple ways. First their non-blondness identifies them as secondary characters. While the narrative might feature their stories from time to time, the show is not about them. They do not hold title roles nor receive starring credits. At best they are guest stars, which indicates their temporary and supporting spot in the narrative. Only Debbie achieves co-star status. Although she appears in multiple episodes in each of the last four seasons of *Mad about You*'s network run, she achieves co-starring status for only in season six. Even then, this billing does not provide her with more access to either screen or narrative.

Secondly, the darkness of their hair indicates a lack of trustworthiness. After Kathy's murder, Abby becomes a suspect. Even at the scene as she recounts Kathy's murder Abby's reliability is called into question. Detective James Martinez questions her account of the shooting three times:

ABBY: Kathy tried to get the gun that we keep in that drawer.

GREG: Was he getting' violent? Is that why she did that?

ABBY: [almost crying] I don't know.

JAMES: What, he just suddenly shot?

ABBY: She was worried about ME. I could see her getting more and more worried. And uh, and then she just suddenly protected me. And the guy shot her. I ran for the bedroom, and the guy shot me too.

GREG: And that's when you got hit in the arm?

ABBY: [nodding] Then he left. I don't, I don't think the whole thing could have taken more than a minute.

JILL: What kind of look did you get at him Abby?

ABBY: White. Uh, uh 30's, druggie look. No facial hair. Maybe 5 foot 10.

JAMES: So, pretty nondescript looking.

GREG: What'd he take?

ABBY: Uh, juh, just the keys.

JAMES: But he made no effort to rob the place?

Later at Abby's apartment Greg questions her reliability saying. "I think there's more you could say." He is angry when she remembers that her former girlfriend might live in the neighborhood where Kathy's stolen car was found.

In "Tragedy Plus Time" Debbie proves her fickleness by kissing a man the night before her engagement party to Joan. Debbie admits her role as the aggressor. She kissed him. She leans over him as the others enter the room—her hair tousled and her lipstick smeared. As they discuss Debbie's behavior, Paul points out how she repeats this behavior whenever faced with making a commitment to a partner:

PAUL: Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Do you remember, do you remember the week end before you married Gary?

DEBBIE: Yeah.

PAUL: Yeah, okay. You remember what you did?

DEBBIE: What I did?

PAUL: The caterer.

DEBBIE: With the caterer?

PAUL: With the caterer, what you did. Remember? In the kitchen? In the kitchen? In the kitchen, in the kitchen of the catering--of Arnold's of Great Neck?

DEBBIE: In the kitchen? Ooh! I made out with the caterer in the kitchen of Arnold's of Great Neck.

SYLVIA: Uck! I wouldn't even walk into that kitchen!

JAMIE: Well, what were you thinking?

DEBBIE: I was terrified. I panicked. [to Paul] And meanwhile thank you for keeping a secret!

PAUL: I kept it for nineteen years. I think that's a pretty good job. But stay with me because I'm on to something very clever here. Do you remember after college? Remember when what's his name--the glasses? Herbie, Herbie Rice. You remember?

DEBBIE: Uh huh.

PAUL: And he asked you to move in with him. Do you remember what you did?

DEBBIE: I fooled around with his brother Billy Rice in the Rice's kitchen.

PAUL: Yes!

JAMIE: Wow!

PAUL: The point is there is a trend. Don't ya see? There is a trend here. Before you can make a commitment apparently you need to play a little slap and tickle in the kitchen somewhere.

DEBBIE: Oh my God!

Debbie is not only unreliable--she is predictably unreliable. She unconsciously repeats the mercurial behavior.

Finally, the darkness of their hair color positions them as less than desirable to men. Although Greg has a crush on Abby in *NYPD Blue*, the narrative positions him as oafish, soft, and socially awkward with women. The other male police officers in the 15th precinct often ridicule him as less than manly. His lack of manliness renders him unworthy of the affections of a “real” woman, and Abby’s lesbianism negates her authenticity as a woman. This unmanliness allows Greg to act as the sperm donor for the lesbian couple. Surely, none of the macho detectives in the precinct would agree to father a child without the benefit of sex. Yet, the narrative clearly spells out the ground rules of the arrangement made by Abby and Greg:

GREG: Abby, I'll be happy to give my sperm to you and Kathy. Uh, naturally I, I have some questions about the context. I, I, I, I mean, uh, I certainly uh, uh, am aware that it, it, it's an artificial process

ABBY: We find out when I start ovulating. You ejaculate into a sample jar whenever you can.

GREG: I see. I see.

Abby does not converse with other officers except when being questioned about Kathy’s murder. She does not socialize or exchange pleasantries with anyone in

the precinct except Greg. She does not appear in scenes without Greg. She does not present as available to or desired by other males in the narrative.

Debbie's undesirability is cast in a different light. Because Debbie is divorced, the narrative implies that a man has already rejected her. Furthermore, she does not so much attract the attention of a man as she takes advantage of Chris, a man grieving over the death of his brother and the loss of his brother's fortune to Debbie's sister-in-law, Jamie. However, Chris is complicit in their dalliance. By kissing Debbie, he creates conflict for Jamie. He wants to punish Jamie for being the beneficiary of his brother's estate. Debbie is not desirable as a sexual partner but rather acts as a tool of Chris' anger.

Joan too draws the affections of a male character on *Mad about You,* but again the attraction is less than authentic. Paul's cousin, Ira, attempts to force a kiss on Joan after he hears that she admires him. Ira admits the thought of a sexual liaison with a lesbian excites him. He sleazily tells Paul, "A lot of ladies have said a lot of things about me, but nobody from the other camp has ever admitted to having a fantasy about me. Now that, that is truly, truly sexy." He understands Joan's affections are unattainable, but his self-importance clouds his judgment.

Although played for laughs, the scene comes across uncomfortably. The situation comedy genre allows the humor of the scene to transcend the staging. Ira's character, and average-looking man, projects a disproportionally large ego about his attractiveness to women. When Joan attempts to clear up the misunderstanding about her attraction for him, Ira grabs her. They wrestle. He

tries to persuade her as she rebuffs his advances. The tall statuesque Joan physically towers over Ira. The audience understands that Joan is taller than, smarter than, and more mature than Ira and thus fears no real danger for Joan as a consequence of Ira's advances. Finally, Joan pushes Ira to the floor. He stands, straightens his jacket, and says, "So we're cool?" as Joan looks at him in disbelief. He exits, and the scene ends. Joan bests Ira physically and emotionally eradicating her desirability.

Reception and Respect

Family plays very different roles in these two narrative characterizations. In *NYPD Blue* Abby and Kathy apparently have no family connections outside of their relationship. Neither mentions any connection to parents, siblings, or any extended familial ties. No family joins Abby and Kathy at the hospital for the insemination. No family comforts Abby when Kathy is murdered, and no family mourns Kathy's death. Greg, the sperm donor and Abby's coworker, appears to be their only friend.

While Debbie holds the familial connection of sister in the *Mad about You* narrative, Joan is not related to the main characters. She enters the show a full season after the narrative establishes Debbie as a supporting character. Joan needs the approval of Debbie's brother, Paul, his wife, Jamie, and of course Debbie's parents, Sylvia and Burt. Even Paul's cousin, Ira, weighs in on Joan's narrative status from time to time. The security of Joan's position in the narrative depends on the approval of the others, but the narrative requires no real struggle.

When Debbie tells her family she is gay, her relationship with Joan is accepted, embraced, and celebrated:

> BURT: You know what? It's none of my business. Are you happy?
>
> DEBBIE: Yes, I'm happy pop.
>
> BURT: Eh, do you need money?
>
> DEBBIE: No. I'm fine. Really. I'm doing fine.
>
> BURT: How's the car?
>
> DEBBIE: It's great.
>
> BURT: Good. Let's eat.
>
> DEBBIE: Paulie, are you okay?
>
> PAUL: Yeah, no listen; I feel the same as Pop.
>
> DEBBIE: Paulie?
>
> PAUL: No, hey, Deb, listen I love you, and you know, I want you to be happy, and in love and all that good stuff and, you know, if it's with another woman then, you know, then, what do I care? That's nothing. You know?

Lack of familial connections foreshadows an absence of narrative respect for Abby and Kathy. Perhaps the genre or the overall network direction informs their narrative, but the overall tone of *Mad about You* feels much different than that of *NYPD Blue*. Debbie and Joan seem much more integral to the ensemble cast while Abby and Kathy never achieve that status. Abby and Kathy merely function as color commentary in Greg's narrative. Kathy appears in only three episodes of *NYPD Blue*. Her three scenes illustrate how disposable her character is in the narrative. We meet Kathy as Greg dines with the lesbian couple at their apartment. Next we see Kathy at the hospital just before Abby is to be

inseminated with Greg's sperm. Finally in her third appearance the viewer sees only her corpse splayed carelessly on the floor.

NYPD Blue bills itself as a gritty crime drama and certainly depicts the seedier side of New York crime. True to form, the lesbian corpse and her partner receive little regard. The well-televised "brotherhood of the Blue" abandons Abby. One officer on the scene of the murder condescendingly intones that two women live at the address, and one of the women is "on the job." A female detective replies, "Yeah, we know Abby." No one refers to Abby as "officer" or mentions her rank. The crime scene photographer throws back the sheet covering Kathy's body and begins to take pictures. The flash of the camera and sound of the shutter distract Abby as she gives her statement to the investigating officers. The female police detective nods in the direction of the photographer motioning him to stop, and then urges Abby to continue.

Many *NYPD Blue* scenes feature explicit sex scenes and include nudity, but the lesbian couple shows very few signs of affection and certainly no indicators of physical sexuality. Abby speaks of Kathy as her partner and as her lover, but the viewer does not see them engaged in sexual behavior. In fact they barely touch. In "A Wrenching Experience" during dinner at their apartment Abby glowingly speaks of Kathy's writing skills. She gently squeezes Kathy's hand. The camera focuses on their hands for a second and then pans up to Greg's face to get his reaction. His facial expression and his sigh mark his uneasiness. Greg's anxiety about their lesbian sexuality represents the heterosexual world's fear of homosexuality. He struggles to understand, but even this small hint of the

couple's lesbian sexuality makes him uncomfortable. Instead the scene becomes about him--his writing aspirations; his knowledge of seafaring songs; and his discomfort with the art on the wall that reminds him of a vagina. His commentary invalidates their display of affection.

Abby acts more affectionately with Greg than with Kathy. In "What a Dump" she reaches across a restaurant table and lovingly caresses his hand when he accepts her invitation to meet Kathy. She holds his hand until the end of the scene. In "Emission Impossible" she warmly rubs Greg's arm when he picks up the specimen jar. When he delivers his sperm to the hospital, she takes his face in her hands and thanks him with an elegant speech about his kindness and his worthiness as a father. She kisses him on the cheek and looks into his eyes. When Kathy steps behind her and tenderly rubs her shoulder for a brief second, Abby does not return Kathy's touch. She turns to go into the procedure room then stops at the door and turns her attention back to Greg. The music swells, and Greg gives his approval one last time. The camera focuses on Greg and lingers on him as he reflects. He exits and closes the door of the waiting room symbolically closing the door on the episode, the situation, and ultimately the lesbian narrative.

What's Cooking?

Television often uses the kitchen as a metaphor. Kitchens are familiar to viewers and generally serve as a central meeting place of the American family home. Additionally, kitchen sets are fairly easy to build, light, and stage. Meal and restaurant scenes also become part of this analogy. Abby and Greg share

several restaurant scenes, and *NYPD Blue* uses these scenes to showcase a deepening intimacy between the pair. Camera framing and the actor's movements suggest their growing familiarity and comfort with each other. In the episode "Unembraceable You" the light from the distant window and the brightness of the scene indicates Abby and Greg are sharing lunch and not a romantic dinner. Their conversation stays casual as they discuss whether the revelation of Abby's gayness was well timed. The camera cuts lightly back and forth between them signaling the ease of this friendly luncheon conversation. They smile glowingly when the waitress asks if they enjoyed their meals as the camera cuts between them one last time punctuating the scene's close.

At their next meal together the symbolism grows darker. In the episode "What a Dump" the camera lens provides a voyeuristic leer to open the scene by framing Abby and Greg in a two-shot as they dine in a dimly-lit restaurant. The camera angle switches between over-the–shoulder shots of each character as they converse. When Abby asks Greg if he wants to meet Kathy, the camera shots tighten into close ups.

> ABBY: Greg if, if you'd just as soon not meet Kathy I'd understand.
>
> GREG: I didn't mean to give offense. You, you just took me unawares.
>
> ABBY: This is all pretty much new territory for you.
>
> GREG: Past workplace contacts you're, you're the first decisively gay woman I've had much to do with. And the truth is each hurdle we clear in our friendship I find I'm delighted I leaped.
>
> ABBY: Well, something unfamiliar doesn't have to be bad.
>
> GREG: You raise such an interesting point.

> ABBY: Well I, I was just remembering the first time I saw you. You were looking at that Stairmaster like it was a T-Rex.
>
> GREG: Exactly, exactly, and look how wonderful that turned out. The lesson I'm sensing Abby is I can't run from new experiences. Suddenly being willing to use force on the job for example. That can be good or wrong depending on context. I can't reject the thing on a … I'd be delighted to meet Kathy. Have a three-way dinner.
>
> ABBY: That's great.
>
> GREG: Why not, right?
>
> ABBY: That's right.
>
> GREG: What could possibly happen to me.
>
> ABBY: [leaning forward and touching Greg's hand] I'm really glad, Greg.
>
> GREG: And then um, getting to know your friend Kathy that in itself would be the special occasion you spoke of?
>
> ABBY: Well, let's just take it one step at a time.

As they discuss Greg's growth and his experiences, the shots continue to focus on their faces. As soon as Greg accepts Abby's invitation to meet Kathy the voyeuristic camera framing returns. The subtext of Greg's double entendre "I'll be glad to join you for a three-way dinner" and the leering two-shot invoke images of a ménage à trios. The kitchen metaphor, although turned on its head, continues to signal a deepening relationship between Abby and Greg.

When Greg joins Abby and Kathy for dinner at their home, he sits alone at the dinner table while Abby and Kathy remain in the kitchen preparing the meal. They enter the dining area carrying wine, glasses, and a plate of food. They settle at the table alongside Greg. The acts of cooking and serving signal their

readiness and suitability for motherhood. Abby later tells Greg, “We wanted you to meet Kathy, so you would know the baby would have a stable home life.”

White illuminates the scene. White placemats mark the table settings. Whites and light tones fill much of the artwork decorating the white walls of their apartment. White mattes border framed photos. Off-white pendant lights hang over the dining table. An ivory shade tops a lamp on a credenza. White generally suggests goodness, purity, and rightness. Combined with the other elements of the scene the narrative should infer that their relationship with Greg might move in a positive direction. Yet, with all of this whiteness the scene remains dark. The conversation feels forced and uncomfortable. The characters come together in the traditional family setting to share wine and a meal. The metaphor holds as the relationship between Abby, Kathy, and Greg continues to grow, but it stops short of validating the lesbian’s experience. The lesbians may be prepared for motherhood, but the narrative remains indecisive with the notion.

NYPD Blue employs this oppositional juxtaposition of the kitchen metaphor throughout the Abby/Kathy storyline. The narrative draws the characters into the familial scene interweaving common threads between them and then dismissing the resulting actions as anomalies. In the end the tie that binds is ultimately recuperated. Greg becomes the sperm donor and the father figure for Abby. Following Kathy’s murder, Greg has the last words. He consoles Abby, ”No intention other than friendship Abby, I hope you'll let me be a resource for you.”

Both shows in this analysis use the kitchen as a staging area, but *Mad about You* relies on it more heavily in a traditional sense. The kitchen anchors Debbie's portrayal. Once exposed, her lesbianism forces the narrative to eliminate Debbie's children and any relationship with them. The last mention of her children comes in "Ovulation Day" just before Debbie reveals her lesbianism. When she and Jamie meet for lunch, Debbie relates that she went to Vermont with Joan. Jamie asks, "You take the kids?" In a later season Debbie adamantly voices her objection to having more children although her partner, Joan, wants children. However, even in the absence of her children, Debbie retains her motherly persona, and the kitchen provides the avenue of the characterization.

Many of Debbie's scenes take place in the kitchen or revolve around food. She cooks holiday meals at Paul and Jamie's. She makes pies. She serves tea to Joan at the end of a harrowing day. She delivers tuna casseroles to Paul and Jamie after the birth of their child. When she decides to introduce her parents to Joan, she invites them to lunch. The night before she frantically arrives at Paul and Jamie's in search of the cooking tools she needs:

> DEBBIE: You have a fish knife!
>
> PAUL: Whyyyy do you say it like that?
>
> DEBBIE: You have a fish knife! I know you do. Don't lie to me! I gave it to you. Just admit it to me! Unless you sold it, you have one!
>
> JOAN: She's very nervous about the lunch.
>
> PAUL: Oh, then by all means, let's give her a sharp knife.

DEBBIE: I'm not nervous about the lunch. I'm serving trout which is a huge gamble, you know. Delicious, yes, but more bones than, than, than, what! What, what has a lot of bones?

PAUL: Skeleton. Big skeleton.

JOAN: Whatever.

JAMIE: Okay, okay, here we go. Everybody take it easy. It's all gonna be fine.

DEBBIE: Thank you.

JAMIE: Do you need anything else?

DEBBIE: No. No. No.

JOAN: What about the casserole dish?

DEBBIE: Casserole dish!

JAMIE: I know where it is. I know where it is. Here, here, here you go. Here you go. Here you go.

PAUL: Casserole!

JAMIE: Okay. Anything else?

DEBBIE: No. No. Nah!

JOAN: What about the garlic press?

DEBBIE: Garlic press!

JAMIE: Garlic press!

PAUL: Garlic press!

JAMIE: Here ya go. Here, here.

PAUL: All right.

JAMIE: Anything else?

DEBBIE: Anything else?

JOAN: A whisk!

DEBBIE: A whisk!

JAMIE: Wait!

DEBBIE: And about a gallon of wine.

JAMIE: You know they're not heavy drinkers?

DEBBIE: It's for me. Now.

JOAN: She's nervous about the lunch.

DEBBIE: I'm not nervous about the lunch. All right. I'm nervous. I don't know why I'm nervous. Mom's gonna meet Joan.

PAUL: Well, maybe that's why.

JAMIE: All right you guys, what should we drink to?

JOAN: Uh, to your family.

DEBBIE: My family! Dysfunctional! Judgmental! Intolerant! Oppressive! Petty! And small!

The kitchen in this case provides multiple clues to Debbie's character, and this scene serves as an allegory for her lesbianism. Sophisticated enough to serve trout for a luncheon, Debbie apparently lacks the tools to do so. Debbie readily commits to her lesbianism. In "Ovulation Day" she mentions undergoing therapy after her divorce. She admits experimenting in college. She did not choose to become a lesbian; she accepted her lesbianism. Nonetheless, she somehow feels unsure about this lesbian identity. She worries about acceptance, judgment, tolerance, and oppression. She brings this doubt to the center of her world—the Buchman's kitchen.

The kitchen in *Mad about You* also invokes notions of a Jewish mother toiling over a hot stove to prepare food for her family--sacrificing herself for the good of the others. When Debbie enters the kitchen, she suddenly develops an exaggerated and stereotypical Jewish accent. Her accent deepens when she admonishes Paul to read the directions on the baby carrier she gives him. She begins to sound so much like Sylvia that Paul asks her to loop her mother's voice in his film. She acquiesces. The kitchen metaphor normalizes Debbie. The apron and the accent point to her role as the eventual matriarch of the Buchman clan.

When Debbie exits the kitchen her personality seems to swing in an opposite direction. She swears. She storms out. On at least one occasion she punches. When she learns Paul and Jamie are expecting a child but have been keeping the news secret, Debbie calls Paul a son of a bitch. When she learns her sister has called dibs on inheriting their mother's china, Debbie tells her mother, "Look if she wants something, let her get her big ass out of bed and come over and get it." Uncharacteristic of the program, the swearing draws attention to Debbie. Her angry outbursts continue. She punches the mascot of a pizza parlor when he tries to force her to take a flier she does not want. She and Joan fight because Joan eats pizza from the restaurant. In "The New Friend" she storms out of a dinner celebrating Paul's film award because she feels her Mother favors Paul. She tells Joan, "You fill me with rage!" in "Fire at Riff's" when Joan accepts a nomination as one of the most eligible young bachelorettes in New York. This crossness marks her as dour and surly. In essence she becomes the angry militant lesbian when she exits the kitchen.

While the kitchen substitutes for many things in these two television narratives, it also brings something new. In prior portrayals lesbian characters were not seen in their own home. Yet both lesbian couples in these narratives interact in their own homes as a family and as couples. They are allowed to socialize and to entertain in their own homes. In the case of Debbie and Joan they are allowed to share meals and even a bed. This represents quite a change and almost a sea change in American television. The kitchen provides a cornerstone for these developments.

Producers weave complex and sometimes even labyrinthine paths in bringing lesbian images to the viewers. As this discussion reveals changes in tone are set by production elements such as costuming, casting, lighting, camera framing, and set decoration. Writers adapt narrative tone to satisfy networks and advertisers and employ symbolism to enrich characters and add meaning to the viewing experience. This chapter dissected the images of Abby and Kathy from *NYPD Blue* and Debbie and Joan from *Mad about You* and offered an explanation of the signs and codes within the narrative.

This analysis focused on four aspects or themes that emerged from the narratives in this programming: wardrobe, haircolor, respect and reception, and a kitchen/dining metaphor. Each category placed the lesbian characters in a position that allowed them to interact inside a heterosexual narrative. However, this narrative placement did little to provide the lesbian characters with a narrative of their own. A multiplicity of voice in a true postmodern feminist fashion did not develop. Rather a channeling of the mainstream heterosexual norm ran

throughout the programs. The lesbian characters found neither their own voices nor their own communities in which to interact.

Wardrobe, which typically positions lesbian characters into “butch” and “femme” roles in a lesbian narrative, functioned less to perpetuate a butch/femme binary in these programs than in most lesbian-themed narratives from this time period. Moreover, the costuming in these episodes sometimes singled out the lesbian character as different and at other times conversely subsumed her into the role of “normal woman” making her identical to the heterosexual female images in the narrative. Debbie Buchman transformed from powerful business executive to smiling bridesmaid by merely shedding her black dress. Wardobe played its greatest role in positioning the lesbian characters in their professional roles. From Abby’s lack of a police uniform to Joan’s white coat, clothing clearly set the rank or status of the characters.

Haircolor also functions to position the lesbian character on network television. In this case their dark haircolor signaled their difference. Their already tenuous narrative status was minimized, criticized, and sometimes rejected. Their dark hair set the lesbian characters apart as less important, less trustworthy, and less appealing in the narrative.

The reception and the respect afforded the lesbian characters highlights the political dynamic of functioning without a community in a television narrative. Abby and Kathy had no family and failed to truly build a coalition with Greg. Once he provided the necessary sperm for Abby’s insemination, no hope of a continued relationship was foreseen. Even Greg noted the torch had been

passed. Without this familial link, Abby and Kathy were expendable. Debbie and Joan fared a bit better, but even in their narrative when they threatened to step outside the existing Buchman clan and create their own family unit by uniting in marriage, their narrative became ambiguous. Debbie's dalliance with Chris muddles the engagement storyline and the fate of the lesbian couple is not revealed until the series finale. Although the lesbian couple announced their engagement with a lavish party, the lesbian wedding is never portrayed.

Lastly in the analysis, the cooking/dining metaphor provides perhaps the most captivating picture of the lesbian characterizations. Pictures of home and hearth draw in viewers and create a familiar bridge between television viewer and television character. The common experience of sharing a meal provides a useful stage for introducing diverse narratives. The kitchen metaphor provides a link that ties the lesbian character to her own political reality when she is allowed to interact in her own home. It is here in the context of the kitchen that the lesbian characters achieve the most stability in the narrative.

The television landscape swings this way and that. Many times, if not always, it follows the general political climate of the country. The particular lesbian portrayals in this analysis capture a specific place in time when both the television industry and the viewing public were open to differing notions of family, of characterizations, and even of sexualities. However, just as quickly as this multiplicity of narratives arrives, they are also apt to disappear.

Such a phenomena is evidenced by the dearth of lesbian characters after Abby, Kathy, Debbie, and Joan leave the broadcast lineup in the late 1990s. By

2003, lesbian characters barely appear on the big four networks in prime-time. In a post 9/11 American sensibility the boundaries of the television narrative are drawn tightly. Anyone who looked, spoke, or acted differently was shut out of public discourse and television reflected this trend.

The lesbian chic of the 1990s became merely an afterthought. No longer could characters like Debbie and Joan live happily ever after. We as a society were unsure that anyone, let alone an “Other” could survive. Any media image unable to be presented in the context of red, white, blue, motherhood, and apple pie ceased to exist. Patriotic images of military heroism rescuing victims and exacting revenge consumed the airwaves. The homosexual image was weak, outside the norm, and no longer part of the American television dialogue. After all in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” society even hushed tones and gay rumors were excommunicated from the mainstream. Even if it was “okay to be gay” no one wanted to talk about it and certainly no one wanted to see it on television.

This examination of prime-time network programming reveals a subtle evolution of the lesbian image. Much argument has been made over whether “the” lesbian image can be referred to. My critics question my use of the phrase “the lesbian image” asking is there really one specifically lesbian image. My answer remains of course not. Lesbians are as diverse as the rest of the human race. However, television paints a fairly oversimplified depiction of “the lesbian image.” She is masculine but possesses an undying need to mother. She wears flannel but has long flowing hair. She is at best sardonic and at worst psychotic, presented as either self-deprecating or self-destructive. Either way the narrative

reveals her flaws, and she struggles to be taken seriously. She remains a disposable piece of the television landscape.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study applies a lens of scrutiny to televised media by closely examining a sample of lesbian images and texts from prime-time network television and exposing the semiosis imposed on these images. Much has changed and little has changed in lesbian images on network television in the past forty-five years. On one hand lesbian characters have increased in number in broadcast network prime-time programming, and characterizations are much more positive than their counterparts from the sixties and seventies. On the other hand, heteronormativity continues to attenuate and offset the strength of these images. Early portrayals of lesbians as psycho-killers, tragic victims, and predators have given way to characterizations of more socially adjusted lesbians who are able to participate in the everyday reality—or at least the everyday mediated reality-of a heterosexual character's world.

The results of this analysis suggest a shift in the unspoken rules that emerged in Dow's (2001) research on seventies' and eighties' programming. The evolving lesbian characterizations now hold recurring positions rather than appearing in single episode roles. While these portrayals are recurring, they remain limited. Only Debbie and Joan survived until the end of the show's narrative. However, their appearances waned in the later seasons of *Mad about You* and their status was left undefined for the majority of the final season of the program. The series finale portrayed them as a couple and announced that they

lived happily ever after—a first for a lesbian couple on television. Kathy's character made only three appearances on *NYPD Blue* with her third appearance being as a corpse. After Kathy's murder Abby also disappears from the narrative. Greg's offer to share the video of her child's birth with his cronies at the precinct upon his return from visiting Abby upstate ties up her storyline.

In contrast to previous research, lesbianism in this analysis is presented as less of a problem for the heterosexual characters, but heterosexual reaction to lesbian sexuality remains key to lesbian portrayals. Greg, while slightly taken aback by Abby's revelation of gayness, goes on to socialize with the lesbian couple and even father a child for them. He does not question Abby and Kathy's status as a couple. However, their narrative relies on Greg's maturation as a character and hinges on his decision to become their sperm donor. Debbie's family has almost no reaction to her announcement. Sylvia, the only holdout, quickly adapts to the news of Debbie's lesbianism. The family welcomes Joan into the family, and the couple immediately takes their place at family gatherings. When Paul and Jamie decide to have a child, they approve of Debbie and Joan as guardians. Other characters refer to Debbie and Joan as spouses and for the most part offer them the same respect afforded to the married couples on the program.

Because the lesbian characters are secondary players and do not assume primary roles in the narrative they remain one-dimensional. Viewers learn certain aspects of their characterizations, but the main characters in the narrative must provide clues to the actions and motivations of the lesbian characters. The

viewer must understand Greg to begin to understand Abby. Without Greg, Abby and Kathy hold no place in the narrative. Their story provides some basis for the growth or maturation of his masculinity. Paul and Jamie must explain the roles Debbie and Joan hold in the narrative. In season two Debbie first enters the narrative as Paul's sister giving her narrative place and standing. Season five introduces Joan as Debbie's girlfriend, but until Joan becomes Paul and Jamie's obstetrician she does not achieve true narrative status. Once she establishes a connection to them outside of her relationship with Debbie, she is free to interact with Paul and Jamie, the main characters, independently.

The absence of lesbian sexuality remains the rule however. While the lesbians can be seen in their own home and can maintain lives separate from the heterosexual characters, they cannot have active sex lives. Abby and Kathy barely touch. Debbie and Joan push the envelope farther. They share a kiss outside on the street. They share a bed inside their apartment. However, the narrative makes it clear they are sleeping and nothing sexual is taking place. In the bedroom scene both wear long-sleeved clothing completely covering their bodies. Debbie's old-fashioned pink nightgown and Joan's red long johns indicate a total lack of sexuality. As soon as the phone awakens them, Debbie exits the bed and dresses. They exchange no intimacies.

In a postmodern feminist view words remain key to lesbian identity--the words that lesbian characters use to describe themselves and the words that heterosexual characters use to describe lesbianism. In the two programs in this analysis multiple identifiers describe lesbian identities and relationships. Abby

identifies herself as gay. Debbie refers to herself as a lesbian. Debbie and Joan call each other partners, significant others, and wife. When discussing ways Debbie could introduce her, Joan runs down a list including fiancée, girlfriend, lover, partner, and companion. Abby says Kathy is her lover and later calls her the “person I love.” When Greg asks Abby if she is talking about a lesbian bar, he pronounces the word with disdain as if he can’t bear the thought of Abby at a lesbian bar. A young Hispanic suspect in an earlier episode calls Abby a dyke in an attempt to insult her. Tommy, the murder suspect, also uses the term “dyke.” However, his use indicates his lack of sophistication and functions as a marker of class rather than a stereotype or slur. His comment holds no judgment. “Dyke” is simply the only vocabulary he possesses for lesbianism. The doctor who lived across the hall referred to Abby and Kathy first as lesbians and then as lovers to emphasize his disapproval.

Even though sexuality remains absent from the lesbian narrative in prime-time broadcast television, the foundations are beginning to shift. Lesbian images have become less sensational. Lesbian desire is acknowledged and now holds at least a tenuous place in the ongoing television dialog. However, these limited images of lesbian desire continue to be sanitized. The lesbians must aspire to attain the American dream of wifedom and motherhood and function as exact replicas of their heterosexual counterparts. This normalization allows Debbie and Joan to inhabit their own reality. After declaring their love for each other, they share Chinese takeout in their own apartment, at their own dining table, alone, dressed in robes. They are able to have a life together, warts and all. They

argue. They make up. They plan for and ultimately share a future together. They look exactly like and act exactly like the heterosexual women in the narrative. Abby and Kathy represent the opposite side of the coin. Although they pursue the dream of motherhood, they fall short. Their narrative presents them as unstable. They have no family to rely on. They have questionable histories. Marriage or a commitment ceremony was not a viable option for Abby and Kathy. Longevity was unattainable by the lesbian couple, and therefore one of the partners must be eliminated. They are deprived of the heterosexual privilege of happiness and a place in the narrative. After almost half a century, the basic critique of media remains. Lesbians are afforded limited narrative opportunities and a narrow range of portrayals in American television.

In this analysis the research questions were framed in terms of "how" rather than "what." I investigated how lesbian characters are portrayed in prime-time broadcast television and how lesbian couples are treated in the television narrative. The analysis explored the signs and codes found in the texts of two prime-time network offerings. By focusing on narrative devices that impart meaning to these signs, a reasonable notion of mediated lesbian portrayals emerged. Lesbian characters rarely assume title roles on broadcast network television. They continue to function as supporting commentary for the predominantly upper class privileged heterosexual television narrative. As minority characters, lesbians have settled back into the shadows of prime-time occupying only the slightest portion of the major broadcast network's schedules.

However, while not fully formed or multi-dimensional, lesbian portrayals continue to mature and develop.

In the case of the lesbian couple dynamic the results were inconclusive. The portrayals rarely focused on the interaction between the lesbian partners, but centered instead on the lesbian's interactions with heterosexual characters in the narratives. Abby and Kathy were never pictured together outside of their relationship with Greg or outside the context of their desire to become pregnant using his sperm. Debbie and Joan are allowed to interact privately at times. They share meals together. They walk down the street together. They sleep together. They argue. They make up. These scenes reflect little difference between the lesbian couple interaction and the heterosexual couple interaction. However, the scenes do not delve into the personal dynamic that exists between Debbie and Joan. The narrative is not about their interaction, but about the heterosexual's experience surrounding the lesbian narrative.

In the context of late 1990s programming the political influences on American broadcast television are quite evident. Shortly after these portrayals aired, a conservative tone re-emerged in network television. In light of the hanging chads and disputed electoral votes in the 2000 presidential election the country's political landscape was evenly divided in fifty-fifty trade off that allowed no influx of change and barely tolerated the status quo. Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, and Tom Brokaw anchored the daily television dialogue and Ted Koppel provided the nightcap. The L-words were Letterman and Leno. Little chance for a new lesbian narrative existed.

No room was found for either Cixous' notion of a female style or Irigaray's idea of a female language. While making some headway, women and thus lesbians, were still largely shut out of the Hollywood production machine at this time. Both shows in this analysis were produced by men although the *NYPD Blue* episodes featured one female writer and Helen Hunt directed one of the episode's of *Mad about You* analyzed. Likewise no evidence of Irigaray's reappropriation of the fetishized female image appears in these shows.

Postmodern feminist theory stresses representation and texts as important in developing a female voice. I concur that this notion extends to the lesbian voice as well. New and fuller representations produce new knowledge of and create acceptance of diverse ideologies. Individual contexts change as representations strike a personal chord with a television viewer. Just as Cixous and Irigaray called for a new language to perpetuate the female voice, greater exposure to lesbian characterizations provides opportunities to engage with and consume these new stories and dialogues. There is not one, true lesbian characterization. In keeping with the postmodern feminist position there can be only a collection of stories that create a great fabric of knowledge and weave a rich tapestry of interwoven stories.

Television images remain influential in presenting diverse ideologies to the viewing public. Media scholars and critical viewers alike must seek out alternative voices in the ideological framing of American television. The presentation of televised images and the underlying messages they convey hold an important focus in media scholarship. Each television text is a complex product of creativity

and popular culture. The signs inherent in each choice of shot, in each actor's delivery of dialog, and in each genre's emphasis provide additional data for analysis. Interpreting these texts and applying diverse voices to these signs becomes important in extending knowledge relating to race, gender, class, and sexuality.

So at the end we come to the question that always arises in a work of this nature--does it really all matter? In this multiplicity of voices, in this pastiche of reality, in this deafening roar of unfettered access to media messages my answer is unequivocally yes. As long as the suicide rate for gay teens continues to escalate, as long as our young women starve themselves in pursuit of some unrealistic vogue, as long as our young men suppress their emotions for fear of being judged weak, as long as the color of one's skin or the accent of one's dialect marks one as "other," and as long as different remains unacceptable in the public vernacular, the images seen and heard in the mass media require attention. The importance of dissecting and deconstructing the images that contribute to the myth of a fictionalized version of normal cannot be ignored in popular culture.

Limitations and Future Research

This study brought a relevant focus to the topic of televised images of lesbian characters by closely examining a sample of lesbian images from prime-time network television and exposing the heteronormative views imposed on these images. However, this study is not without limitations. While it adequately

explores two distinctly different portrayals of lesbian characters and couples over a specific period of time, it does not fully explore the genre of either program.

Analysis of only two programs results in a relatively small sample of the overall available pool of lesbian characterizations. The two series chosen were readily available and provided a reasonable cross section of images from the mid 1990s. However, many other programs with lesbian characters, including several portrayals, are accessible only in university archives at Cornell, Syracuse, Iowa, Missouri, and the University of Southern California. Without outside funding these materials were not available for this analysis.

A second limitation concerns the method itself. As with all textual analysis this work remains one person's analysis of a media message and does not suggest any universal meaning or absolute interpretation. It represents a singular research voice, but excludes the voice of the content creators, producers, or actors. Furthermore, it does not fully probe the historical and political implications of the time period in which the shows aired. Thus data that frames the portrayals of the lesbian characters could be further drawn out with additional qualitative analysis.

Thirdly, this analysis barely touches on the intricate relationship between production processes and semiotic clues in television portrayals. Camera framing and movement, among other production variables, impact representations and contribute to the overall presentation of characters. Stretching the boundaries of the analysis to carefully dissect camera movement and framing could further

strengthen the arguments made in this study and reveal sharper details about lesbian depictions.

Lastly, the lesbian characters in this analysis did not step outside the bounds of their white upper middle class environments. Thus this work did not have the opportunity to fully explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, and class in lesbian representations. Extension of the analysis to a larger variety of programming could allow for scrutiny of a greater cross-section of lesbian characterizations.

Despite these limitations, this work provides an important jumping off point for future research to extend the discussion of how American television sees and serves the viewing public. This study revolved around lesbian images as presented on network television over ten years ago. In the current television season only one lesbian couple is featured as part of an episodic drama on the networks of ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX. This drought in lesbian characters remains a pivotal question for American television. Textual analyses of other programs featuring lesbian characters could reveal a progression/regression of lesbian images throughout four decades of television programming.

On a broader scale, similar research into cable programming could be telling. The recent emergence of original programming from cable networks such as TNT, USA, and AMC provides an avenue for rich examination. Additionally the premium network Showtime has been a frontrunner in lesbian-themed programming with the groundbreaking series *The L Word*. Although some research has focused on this program, more room for analysis exists. 2006 saw

the launch of three cable channels aimed exclusively at lesbian and gay audiences—QTV, Here!, and MTV's Logo. Although QTV is no longer on the air, both Here! and Logo continue to operate as cable offerings. The programming of these channels offer very telling looks at the state of the lesbian image in today's television world.

Aside from entertainment television, news coverage of lesbian and gay issues also holds the potential for extensive discovery and critical observation. In addition to the historical news coverage of lesbian and gay issues, the coverage of AIDS has played and still plays an important role in media coverage. Current legislation on same sex marriage and sexual orientation as a civil rights issue will remain at the forefront of the media agenda for years to come. Each of these topics provides an avenue for further research and analysis

Expanding the analysis beyond the genre of episodic dramas and situation comedy also creates new areas for exploration. The popularity of reality programming supplies suitable data. Lesbian participants have been featured in many reality programs such as *Survivor, The Real World, The Amazing Race, Top Chef*, and *Work Out*. Made-for-television movies offer yet another focus on lesbian images. Without the opportunity of episodic development or the chance for reoccurrence, lesbian narratives may present altogether differently as television movie fare.

Finally, extending the research to include interviews with people involved in the production process of lesbian-themed programming and polling viewers consuming the televised images, has the potential to provide perhaps the most

relevant clues to the underlying meanings in the program. This approach could highlight shifting patterns and salient themes in the development of lesbian characterizations on broadcast television. Only in understanding how we are presented and consumed can we enrich the diversity of our media experience.

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