

BARNARD COLLEGE

A LITTLE BIT GAY:

THE NEAR REPRESENTATION OF QUEERNESS IN AMERICAN SITCOMS

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Introduction

Queerness on television is not a new phenomenon. Within the first few decades of the medium (the 50s and 60s) there were representations of queer people, though they were not the most sensitive or accurate.¹ As television and society both evolved, so did the characterization of queer people, but still five decades after the advent of television there was not a “full representation” of a queer main character on a program. For television not to demonstrate a truly queer lifestyle may initially seem unfortunate and detrimental. However, when one evaluates the episodes that contain queer themes but that do not constitute a “full representation,” one can gain a deeper understanding of the power of shows that do not completely illustrate queer culture.

This thesis aims to explore the partial representations of queerness on television and to evaluate the power of “near representations” of queerness. Near representation is a term I created to describe a particular television convention where an episode initially appears to have a complete depiction of LGBT characters, but somehow throughout the episode the questioning of queerness or queer character(s) is dealt with in an incomplete way. I found the need to create the term when I noticed that queer television scholars, many of whom I rely upon frequently in this thesis, are quick to qualify a representation as a success or failure.² I have instead chosen to explore queer representations through a lens reminiscent of Judith Halberstam’s failure analyses.

¹ Stephen Tropiano. *The Prime Time Closet*. 2, Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp, 2002. ; Steven Caputo, *Alternate Channels* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 2000), 3. These representations ranged from television documentaries and reports to dramas, usually representing homosexuality as a

² James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner, introduction to *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2006), 1-2. For example, the premise of the essays in Keller and Stratyner’s collection is to discuss positive and negative queer representations – ignoring the fact that defining representations in those terms is entirely subjective. The two do recognize the ability for a representation to live in the realm of both success and failure, but they only apply this thinking to new, 21st century representations rather than adjusting the analysis of past ones. This is a pervasive theme in queer television analysis and not just limited to this specific text.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam explores various pop culture subjects in order to demonstrate how failure aggravates the heteronormative social construct of success.³ Using a similar framework, I deconstruct each representation in order to find the powerful and revolutionary aspects in them, while also accepting that their power in many ways comes from being just near representation. In their failure at full representation, near representations demonstrate potential not only for television in general, but also for millions of marginalized viewers aching to see alternate representations of American life on television.

In order to provide the best analysis possible, I have limited my scope of reference to situation comedies from the late 1970s to 1997, as it is easier for me to compare and contrast shows from a similar time period and genre. Furthermore, these were the shows I grew up watching, and as such were the ones that allowed me – often through their near representations – to slowly discover my own queer sexuality. Not every episode I discuss deals with overtly queer themes or characters, as there are a wealth of television episodes that subtly engage with queer themes while not explicitly demonstrating homosexuality. I will engage with these sorts of programs, as they are significant to near representation and often ignored in scholarly discussions.⁴

Near representation is a broad idea and can be applied to many television situations. In this thesis I will focus on three different types of situations: 1) A character is questioning his/her sexuality but is reassured of their straightness, or at least deals with the situation through a compassionate talk with an authority figure; 2) A gay character is introduced for a small story arc and then cast off into the shadows, never to be spoken of again; 3) a queer character exists and

³ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.)

⁴ Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, "The Pleasures of the Tube," introduction to *Queer Tv* (London, 2009: Routledge, 2009), 2.

has a story and screen time, but the intimate aspects of his/her relationship, which would normally be normally shown on screen if they were aspects of a straight relationship, are excluded. These three situations occur at different times and demonstrate that even as gay representation evolved and pushed the boundaries over time, it was still not acceptable to show all the possible wide and varied aspects of queerness, and programs had to carefully select what parts of queerness to depict. This is where near representation comes in – as society becomes more comfortable with aspects of queerness, the way in which queerness is shown changes too. However, because of society’s constant evolution these “innovative representations” are not actually all that revolutionary, but certainly have more impact than the ones before them. Therefore, near representation places a subtle but expanding power on the boundaries surrounding the depiction of queerness on television.

I am also intrigued in seeing how near representation challenges the norms of a television show, whether it be norms of sexuality or, even on a more macro level, the norms of growing up, friendship, being a certain gender, etc. In some ways, many shows challenge norms in conjunction with near representation and, therefore, the near representations are more significant while still only exploring a small aspect of queer life.

In section one I explore episodes where characters question their sexuality. This chapter was originally the basis for my entire thesis – with the main primary source used in it having direct resonance in my own questioning and understanding of my sexuality as a child. In this section, I look at the pilot episode of *The Facts of Life*, in which a young teenage girl, Cindy, questions her sexuality after relentless teasing by another girl at her school.⁵ This is the episode

⁵ *The Facts of Life*, "Rough Housing," episode 101, NBC, first broadcast August 29, 1979, directed by Nick Havigna, written by Brad Ridner.

that initially ignited my desire to look at queerness on television because I found it so interesting that a series in 1979 would open with such a controversial story line. I distinctly remember watching this episode at the age of 11 – after I had figured out I was gay, but far before I ever told anyone. The visceral reaction I had to the episode returned as an adult, and I was uneasy about it. I am still unpacking how I feel about the episode, but it led me to think critically about representation of queerness on television, especially when it does not meet one's modern expectations. The episode only alludes to Cindy's problem as one of sexual identity, which is one of the main reasons it is considered a near representation. However, the episode is remarkable for its respectful and authentic treatment of questioning, even while remaining somewhat subtextual. Much of the power of the episode stems from this ambiguity, as it allows for more diverse possibilities than what are normally presented in a questioning narrative.

Section two is an exploration of series that contain one-episode queer story arcs. The primary sources used in this chapter are two separate episodes of *Cheers*, both of which have queer themes but do not relate to each other. The episodes are from opposite ends of the series (the first and tenth seasons), which is important to note because of the drastic changes to public acceptance and perception of queerness during the show's run (1982-1993).⁶ I chose to look at *Cheers* because it is not considered to be a queer series in any way, and as such is an excellent source in which to examine the peculiar television convention of infrequent queer storylines. On a micro level, I examine how these episodes represent queerness while also taking into account, and exploring, their limited influence on the direction of the whole series. I seek to understand

⁶ "Cheers," Internet Movie Database, accessed April 17, 2015,

the purpose of these episodes, and this particular form of near representation, while also noting the effects that they have on the representation of queerness at large.

The third section reviews the limitations of queer intimacy on television. In this section I use examples from *Roseanne* and *Friends*, two series that can be applauded for their wide inclusion of queer characters across multiple story arcs, but at the same time, lack displays of intimacy between queer characters. In this chapter, I seek to figure out why there were limitations on queer intimacy and how the shows attempted, or did not attempt, to reconfigure that desire of intimacy on to other characters. Though these episodes may not have always been able to show intimacy between two queer characters, there are many instances of ways in which the desire for intimacy was shown metaphorically, or through projection onto straight characters.

Finally, I will explore the impact of these forms of near representation in the new age of queer television, often considered to begin following Ellen DeGeneres' 1997 coming out episode in *Ellen*. Does Cindy from *The Facts of Life* coming to the decision that she is straight in an episode from 1979 not stem from the same anxieties that kept Ellen in the closet for the first three seasons of *Ellen*? Furthermore, I want to explore the way in which the near representation in *The Facts of Life* episode later allowed for Ellen to come out at all, and how the kiss between Roseanne and Mariel Hemingway allowed for the intimacy between Ellen and her girlfriend in the final season of *Ellen*. I will also consider if *Ellen* is truly a revolutionary feat in queer representation, or whether the failure of her show – as a true full representation of queerness – demonstrates the importance and power of near representations.

In this thesis I seek to learn what the limitations were that prevented shows from demonstrating all encompassing queer lifestyles, and whether those limitations stayed the same as society and television continued to challenge heteronormative social constructs. When viewed

now, instances of near representation can be aggravating, however, they should still be noted for the way that they disputed the norms of their time. It is easy to write off an episode as incomplete in its representation of queerness, but it is important to realize that even the small attempt at representation was important and spoke to viewers who were struggling with their own identities.

Chapter One

“Maybe I’m Not Normal:” Characters Questioning Their Sexuality

One fairly typical form of near representation of queerness on television is the occurrence of a character, whether a series regular or guest star, questioning his or her sexuality.⁷ The near representation comes not from the act of questioning, but rather from the incompleteness with which some programs deal with the questioning process. A character questioning his or her sexuality, as a common adolescent activity, can be a relatable experience for any viewer. On television though, more often than not, the process is only partially shown or is intercepted by a “reassuring” conversation with an authority figure. These caveats to the depiction of the questioning process are what qualify such depictions as near representation, but their status as such representations does not always mean they are unproductive.

There were few representations of questioning characters on television until the 1990s, mostly due to the fact that questioning often occurs during adolescence and shows especially wanted to avoid depictions of teenage homosexuality for fear it would result in controversy.⁸ Even when questioning became a more popular topic in the 1990s, the majority of shows that dealt with the subject were primetime melodramas and not situation comedies.⁹ Of the handful of sitcom episodes that do depict questioning characters, the majority concern grown adults

⁷ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 191.

⁸ *Ibid*, 165.

⁹ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 171, 173.

questioning their sexualities.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is only one episode from the pre-1990s period that dealt with adolescent queer questioning: the 1979 pilot episode of *The Facts of Life*.¹¹

In this episode, entitled “Rough Housing,” Blair, the conventionally beautiful and rich girl in the house, insinuates that Cindy, the sports obsessed, baseball hat wearing tomboy is a lesbian.¹² Throughout the episode, no character overtly refers to Cindy as homosexual, but instead the subject matter is dealt with through a series of euphemisms such as “strange,” “weird,” and “different.”¹³ This lack of blatantly queer themes is the main reason that this episode is so seldom discussed in queer television studies, as the academic medium rarely explores gay subtext.¹⁴ Up until now, there has been very little scholarly discourse regarding the episode because it is not necessarily a queer representation.¹⁵ However, I argue that it counts as a near representation because of how strongly the possibility of Cindy’s queer sexuality is implied.

At the beginning of the episode, Cindy’s posture and behavior indicate that she is more masculine presenting than the rest of the young women in the all-girls boarding school.¹⁶ Mrs. Garrett, the girl’s housemother and parental figure, is unfazed by Cindy’s behavior, but others

¹⁰ Tropiano, *Prime Time Closet*, 211, 261-306. Based on Tropiano’s extensive “Gay Theme TV Episode Guide” I have concluded that prior to 1990, there are only a total of eight sitcoms that produced episodes that dealt with questioning and coming out (*Maude*, *Phyllis*, *The Facts of Life*, *Taxi*, *Golden Girls*, *Cheers*, *The Love Boat* and *House Calls*). On this point a distinction should be made between episodes in which characters question and/or comes out vs. episodes where characters are presumed gay or are outed. There are more gay themed sitcom episodes, but these eight series are the only ones where the characters willingly chose to reveal their situations.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *The Facts of Life*, “Rough Housing,” episode 101.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, “The Pleasures of the Tube,” introduction to *Queer Tv* (London, 2009: Routledge, 2009), 2.

¹⁵ Out of all the sources I have explored, only Tropiano’s *Prime Time Closet* discusses the episode.

¹⁶ *The Facts of Life*, “Rough Housing,” episode 101.

are less kind.¹⁷ As Cindy walks past Mrs. Garrett, she engages with Willis Drummond, a character from *Diff'rent Strokes*, (the series from which *The Facts of Life* was spun off) and asks why he is at a girl's school.¹⁸ His response, though seemingly playful, is the first sign of conflict in regard to Cindy's sexual/gendered identity as he says, "I was gonna ask you the same thing."¹⁹

Moments later, Willis calls in his brother Arnold (Gary Coleman) by saying: "It's okay Arnold, there aren't any girls in [the house]!"²⁰ When Arnold comes in and sees that his brother lied to him, and that there are girls present, he is angry, but because he is a child it comes off as cute and non-threatening. This joke relies on the assumption of the narrative convention that children are disinterested in the opposite sex (as well as sex in general). Because of this, Arnold's behavior demonstrates a variation on Cindy's actions because she, at the age of fourteen, has already begun puberty and is expected to have ceased her tomboyish ways and developed an interest in boys.

The juxtaposition of Arnold's acceptable aversion to girls and Cindy's more "abnormal" disinterest in boys can be viewed in two different ways, both of which qualify the episode as a near representation. First, Arnold's fear of girls can be seen as an attempt to establish that children are not interested in the opposite sex, situating Cindy's struggle as something she will grow out of – just as how the audience knows that Arnold will grow out of his distaste for girls. By adding the jokes about Arnold being open about not liking girls, Cindy's actual struggle can be viewed as less legitimate. This de-legitimization of Cindy's struggles is a de facto theme within the episode, occurring most notably in the episode's conclusion. However, the parallel

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

between Arnold and Cindy can also serve to magnify Cindy's deviation from the norm. Instead of viewing Arnold and Cindy's reluctance towards the opposite sex as stemming from the same place, one can contrast them, seeing Arnold as being a "normal" child while noting Cindy's obvious difference. Both of these readings are equally valid and therefore demonstrate the malleability of near representations of queerness on television.

Additionally, the characters tease Cindy and Arnold in very different ways. When they tease Arnold, they do it in a way that implies that he will someday be interested in girls. This exchange between Arnold and his adopted sister Kimberly demonstrates the difference:

KIMBERLY: Ah come on, loosen up, Arnold! Girls don't bite!

ARNOLD: Well, I know girls don't bite it's just that girls like to kiss, and you take your life in your hands with the girls who wear braces.²¹

In response to Arnold's comment, Kimberly grabs her brother and kisses him, making him uncomfortable.²² However, despite all the taunting Arnold is quite confident in his objections, something Cindy connects with when she says, "You don't have to worry about me, Arnold, I don't like kissing either. I'm into sports."²³ Cindy notices the connection between herself and Arnold and strengthens the parallel between them through her comment. Simultaneously, she also demonstrates how the company and support of others in her position makes her more confident in herself.

²¹Ibid.

²² Ibid. A seemingly commonplace taunting, this kiss carries more weight than initially recognized. Not only is it incestuous, but it is also interracial – two things that could easily make it controversial. However, based on the subject matter of the episode, the kiss goes almost unnoticed, which demonstrates how much more disruptive the subject of teenage homosexuality is (probably because of its uncommonness on television) as compared to other more common controversial themes.

²³ Ibid.

When the Drummonds leave, Cindy lugs a large tug-of-war rope into the common room and demands the girls start practicing for the contest at the upcoming Harvest Fair, for which Cindy is the captain of the games committee.²⁴ As Blair resists, Cindy grabs her, prompting Blair to jump back and make her first insinuation, “Would you mind not pawing me? You are strange.”²⁵ Blair then calls Cindy “super jock,” prompting Cindy to threaten to punch her.²⁶ Cindy’s reaction to Blair’s comment is the first moment where the audience can see her immediate response to Blair’s bullying. Blair’s comment was relatively benign, yet Cindy is so triggered by it that she attempts to resort to violence. What could be seen as a set up for a joke is in actually a raw moment about the emotional trauma that bullying causes, especially bullying about one’s identity.

Eventually, the girls in the house nominate Cindy to run against Blair, the reigning Harvest Festival Queen.²⁷ It seems that the girls are genuinely rooting for Cindy, though she does not want to accept the nomination. Initially apprehensive, Cindy asks the girls to teach her how to act at a dance and gets caught up in the excitement of it all.²⁸ As the girls run upstairs to get ready, Cindy stops and thanks Sue Anne, the girl who nominated her, with a hug and an “I love you” which causes Blair to comment on her behavior:

BLAIR: Cindy, what’s wrong with you?

CINDY: What do you mean?

BLAIR: All this touching and hugging girls and ‘I love you.’ Boy, are you strange.

CINDY: Well, I didn’t mean anything!

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

BLAIR: I'll just bet. You better think about what you mean.²⁹

Blair walks away and sighs, leaving Cindy alone in the common room. The last shot shows Cindy bewildered and pensive, obviously bothered and confused by Blair's comments.

The next act begins with two of the girls burst into Mrs. Garrett's room to tell her that Cindy has dropped out of the race and has locked herself in her room.³⁰ Mrs. Garrett bribes Cindy with cupcakes to get her to explain what is wrong, pretending she does not know Cindy dropped out and lays out a dress out for her, which Cindy tells her she will not be wearing.³¹ Mrs. Garrett responds by exclaiming, "What? You – You mean you're going to go to the Harvest Ball like that? I mean, whoever heard of queens in jeans?"³² The comment, though seemingly harmless, is an example of the stigmatization that Cindy suffers in the house on a daily basis – where she is constantly criticized for not adhering to conventional standards of femininity. Because of the pressure on Cindy to perform a feminine role at the ball, the choice to nominate her becomes a chance to play dress up rather than an opportunity for the girls to confront Blair's overconfident, seductive, stereotypical femininity with a strong, independent candidate. Furthermore, Mrs. Garrett is Cindy's confidant, and the conversation they are about to have has some very redeeming moments. However, Mrs. Garrett's comment about Cindy's outfit takes away from the overall power of the discussion as it reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal gender constructs.

Cindy expresses to Mrs. Garrett that there is nothing feminine about her and that she would rather be playing baseball, resulting in this exchange:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

CINDY: Nothing would make Blair like baseball, and she was right about me.

MRS. GARRETT: Right about what?

CINDY: About me hugging and touching girls all the time. Not caring about boys. Mrs. Garrett, maybe Blair is right, maybe I'm not normal.³³

The scene and act ends with a close up of Mrs. Garrett's comforting yet concerned face, as well as clapping from the audience.³⁴ The clapping is somewhat unusual for a TV act break, as the audience is usually quiet or enhanced with mood appropriate music. In fact, the first act break in the episode, when Blair makes her more biting insinuation about Cindy being "strange", is a silent one.³⁵ Although it cannot be assumed that the audience clapped without prompting, as many shows require certain responses from their audiences or augment the audience with a laugh track, the clapping itself, whether prompted or not, is an important demonstration of the acceptance of questioning as a common adolescent activity and an appreciation of the show for treating the subject, up until that point in the episode, with respect.

The next act begins with Cindy sitting in an armchair and Mrs. Garrett standing next to her wearing her baseball glove and punching the pocket. While Mrs. Garrett's use of the baseball glove demonstrates that she is still relatable and interested in Cindy's thoughts and feelings, Cindy's movement from standing next to Mrs. Garrett to sitting establishes the hierarchical difference between the two and reminds the viewer that Mrs. Garrett is Cindy's

³³ Ibid. I vividly remember my reaction to this moment as an adolescent. I was frightened because of how strongly I identified with Cindy's fear of not being "normal." I knew I was different yet could not imagine or comprehend how to accept and live that difference.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

superior. This is very important to understanding the importance of the rest of Mrs. Garrett's words.

Mrs. Garrett starts off by telling Cindy that Blair's insensitive intimations should not upset her, which Cindy disagrees with by saying that she looks like a boy and only thinks about sports.³⁶ Mrs. Garrett shuts Cindy down by stating that plenty of women only think about sports, and that Cindy will eventually grow into a womanly body.³⁷ Once again, Cindy disagrees saying, "Well, my time clock just isn't working. I'm fourteen already and I don't even like guys!"³⁸ Mrs. Garrett then explains to Cindy that boys are supposed to make her nervous, and that this will not ever stop. This justification demonstrates the power of social norms to discipline young people, both straight and gay. Nervousness around the opposite sex is presented as typical, therefore serving to dismiss the feelings of difference that young queer people may feel in conjunction with that nervousness.

Despite Mrs. Garrett's attempts to normalize her feelings, Cindy is still unconvinced stating, "Well maybe Blair is right! I don't feel nervous around girls. You know me, I'm always hugging and all that junk. I gotta stop that."³⁹ This is the third time that Cindy has challenged Mrs. Garrett's attempts to quell her fears, which shows that Cindy is not only quite confused and nervous of what others think of her actions, but also that her anxieties are strong enough to persist despite Mrs. Garrett's urgings. Up until this point, Mrs. Garrett has tried to terminate Cindy's fears, but she pauses and changes her tone in this moment and tries to situate Cindy's behavior in a more positive light. She says, "Don't you dare. Up here at the school these girls are

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. Ironically, one of the women Mrs. Garrett mentions is the now out Billie Jean King.

³⁸ Ibid. Mrs. Garrett and Cindy use "time clock" to explain sexual development and interest.

³⁹ Ibid.

your family! There's nothing wrong with hugging and touching – it shows that you're a loving person and that's good."⁴⁰ Following this statement the mood significantly lightens and the two begin to joke about Cindy's burgeoning womanhood, with Mrs. Garrett calling Cindy beautiful. Cindy, though initially reluctant to view herself as such, starts to understand that attractiveness is based on more than the performance of femininity, and begins to value her own beauty. This is one of the most powerful aspects of the episode. Cindy may still be confused about to whom she is attracted, but she no longer sees herself as less of a woman. The culmination of Cindy's self acceptance in this scene is when she says, "I'll tell you one thing, if Blair ever says I don't look feminine again I'm just gonna have to punch her out."⁴¹ This comment is powerful in that it demonstrates that Cindy has found a way to merge her womanhood and her "tomboyishness."⁴² Furthermore, following Blair's apology, Cindy is especially happy to have Blair encourage her to run for Harvest Queen, saying that it will be an honest race if they run "woman to woman." Cindy feels a connection to women – that much is obvious, and when Blair accepts her for the person she is in that moment, Cindy reveals that acceptance is all she wants.

Cindy's refusal to accept the heterosexuality she is promised, in conjunction with Mrs. Garrett's willingness to drop the subject, is an important aspect of the episode's near representation. Though the conversation's lack of resolution most likely stems from the anxieties regarding showing a full representation of adolescent questioning on television, within this failure exists the possibility for many diverse outcomes. This argument draws heavily on Judith Halberstam's failure analyses, in which lack of success is deemed more significant for not

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² This analysis is based on the assumption that Cindy truly views herself as a woman. If there were more indication that Cindy felt out of place in her body in addition to the discomfort she already felt in the heteronormative environment, then this could be viewed through a trans political lens.

adhering to the heteronormative standards of success or failure.⁴³ Up until this point, Cindy's sexuality has remained ambiguous. Though she leans towards queerness, there is no defining aspect of her that indicates her true sexuality. This is a significant violation of the heteronormative binary structure that seeks to compartmentalize people as gay or straight. Joe Wlodarz contextualizes this in regards to subtly queer teenagers on television, stating that characters' queer potentials are anything but diminished by not coming out because, in not adhering to a specific sexual identity, a show is forced to "fall back on a more fluid, uncertain, and unpredictable presentation of adolescent sexuality."⁴⁴ There is more of a potential for self-discovery and self-reflection within ambiguity, even more so than if the conversation concluded with Cindy coming out.

Cindy not being defined as queer allows for queer people to come to their own understanding of their sexuality without feeling the need to adhere to a particular stereotype. Stereotyping can be detrimental to a young confused person's questioning process. For example, in the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, Armistead Muapin describes the impact of visual media stereotypes of gay men of his adolescence, saying: "I felt that something dreadful was going to happen to me... once I actually had sex with another man, and that the end of that road would be suicide."⁴⁵ Conversely, some people view stereotypes as a means to an end. For Harvey Fierstein, "That hunger that I felt as a kid looking for gay images was not to be alone...my view has always been visibility at any cost."⁴⁶ These two contrasting views on

⁴³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Joe Wlodarz, "'We're Not All So Obvious,'" in *Queer TV*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (London: Routledge, 2009), 98.

⁴⁵ *The Celluloid Closet*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, TriStar Pictures, 1995.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

stereotyping demonstrate that near representations defined by ambiguity allow for the possibility of something other than a stereotype, which does not sacrifice visibility.

Somewhat unfortunately, the final moments of the episode make an attempt to resolve Cindy's questioning. Cindy reports to Mrs. Garrett that at one point during the night she was staring at Blair's date when something started to happen – her time clock started ticking and then the boy winked at her.⁴⁷ Blair is initially shocked but then walks over to Mrs. Garrett and Cindy and puts her arm around them and together they walk towards the dining table in their collective heterosexual bliss as the credits begin to roll.⁴⁸ This ending is incredibly convenient and as such solidifies the episode's status as a near representation, but this does not qualify it as a failure.

Regardless of the outcome, Cindy's pain in the vast majority of the episode is incredibly authentic and relatable, and though she may end up complying with the heteronormative standards of sexuality, she still defies other social norms by maintaining her tomboyishness. Though she may not be breaking the heterosexual norm, Cindy is still fighting against the social constructs of proper womanhood represented by Blair (though Blair's triumph in the Harvest Fair suggests that the battle is far from over). This point, however, calls attention to the double standard of non-adherence to traditional gender constructs. While Cindy is able to maintain her more masculine identity and be straight, a man would be unable to maintain a notion of heterosexuality while acting feminine. Social norms surrounding masculinity and the male body do not allow for the coexistence of heterosexuality and femininity.⁴⁹ If Cindy and Arnold had been reversed, there is no way the result would be the same. This broad acceptance of diverse

⁴⁷ *The Facts of Life*, "Rough Housing," episode 101.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ James Black, "Altar Ego," in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television*, ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2006), 181-183.

women as heterosexual has two sides. In some ways it is quite revolutionary, but it also leads to countless instances of exploitation in future queer representations, examples of which will be explored in later chapters. Furthermore, the act of questioning itself demonstrates the potential for a different outcome, and Mrs. Garrett's acceptance of Cindy, regardless of her orientation, shows that those different outcomes are not something to fear. Even just the suggestion that someone can be something other than heterosexual is an assault on heteronormativity because, "the power of norms only grows when their status as norms need not be revealed."⁵⁰ The episode, by just engaging with the chance that Cindy is queer, demonstrates that heterosexuality is a social convention through the insinuation of alternative sexualities.

The pilot episode of *The Facts of Life*, through its ambiguity and near representation, allows for a confrontation with social norms regarding sexuality and femininity. Cindy's confusion and anxieties are relatable, even after she decides she likes boys at the very end. The visibility of the act of questioning in general allows questioning viewers numerous possibilities for their futures, instead of forcing them to re-categorize themselves as stereotypes based on the heteronormative binary construct. This episode is clearly not a full representation of queerness, but it serves to demonstrate the great power that near representations wield.

⁵⁰ Samuel A. Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 67.

Chapter Two

The One Day Gay: Single Episode Story Arcs

In the 1980s and 90s, as homosexuality became an increasingly visible lifestyle, there was a noticeable increase in queer themed television programming.⁵¹ However, despite the rise in clearly queer themed story lines, there was little consistency when it came to the presence of queer characters, most of which were one-episode guest characters.⁵² The story lines in many of these episodes are thoughtful examinations of how the main characters process their relationships with the gay guest characters.⁵³ Yet because these guest characters never reappear, these episodes qualify as near representation. In this chapter, I will examine two different queer guest character episodes from the sitcom *Cheers*, and explore how these episodes, as part of a decidedly non-queer series, both helped and hindered queer acceptance.

The first example is the season one episode entitled “The Boys in the Bar.” Airing in 1983, the episode is about Sam, the owner of Cheers, dealing with his personal feelings about his old roommate coming out, while simultaneously trying to keep the locals from boycotting Cheers out of fear of it becoming a gay bar.⁵⁴ Sam’s friend, Tom, comes to town to promote his autobiography. Because Sam did not read Tom’s book, he does not know that Tom is gay until Tom is asked about the nature of their relationship during the question and answer portion of the

⁵¹ Louis Chunovic, *One Foot on the Floor* (New York: TV Books, 2000), 69.

⁵² Tropiano. *The Prime Time Closet*. 192.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *Cheers*, "The Boys in the Bar," episode 116, NBC, first broadcast January 27, 1983, directed by James Burrows, written by Ken Levine and David Isaacs, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://netflix.com>.

book promotion.⁵⁵ A shocked Sam immediately tries to defend his heterosexuality by highlighting the difference between Tom and him in this exchange:

REPORTER: Sam, you were saying that you two used to do everything together?

SAM: No, you misunderstood that. No as a matter of fact people used to come up and say, "Hey, you two are best friends and yet you're completely different."⁵⁶

Sam then resorts to macho tactics and sexual harassment when Diane, the waitress and moralist, asks him to come to the back room with her as an attempt to save him from embarrassing himself further.⁵⁷ To her request Sam responds, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Will you excuse me? Some chick wants to see me. I can't get rid of them. Ha! You guys know how that is. So, uh, honey can't go in the back room without me!"⁵⁸

Sam's attempt to reassert his masculinity following his encounter with queerness is typical of queer themed sitcom episodes. In these episodes, the straight main character often personifies and works through the anxieties that arise from the challenge to heteronormativity that queerness poses.⁵⁹ As queer visibility increases, heteronormativity becomes unstable because it becomes recognized as a social norm as apposed to a fundamental fact of life.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 208-9.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is from the *Seinfeld* episode, "The Outing," in which the characters would deny their homosexuality and then say, "not that there is anything wrong with that!" This demonstrates the widespread desire to assert one's heterosexuality while also preventing being seen as homophobic. *Seinfeld*, "The Outing," episode 417, NBC, first broadcast February 11, 1993, directed by Tom Cherones.

⁶⁰ Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, 67.

Sitcoms are a powerful medium to explore this subject because they use humor to masquerade a message of tolerance, making it more accessible to the public.⁶¹

When Diane takes Sam into the backroom, she makes him read the following passage from Tom's book: "From the outside, my days in baseball seemed glorious, but the greater my fear became of my true sexuality, the more I compensated with typical Don Juan promiscuity."⁶² This passage not only serves to elucidate Tom's struggle to Sam, but also presents the struggles of homosexuality to the viewer in general. Considering that homosexuality was only removed from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders less than 10 years prior, popular consensus still associated it with perversion and disorder, rather than with an acceptable identity that people struggle to come to terms.⁶³ Therefore, the insertion of Tom's passage in the scene serves to humanize him, transforming him from a distanced "other" to a relatable person. This method of humanization is used in other queer themed sitcom episodes as well, such as in *The Golden Girls* episode "Isn't it Romantic?"⁶⁴ The first act ends after Sam buys Tom a drink, symbolizing that he has come to terms with Tom's sexuality.⁶⁵ This marks the end of Tom's appearance in the episode, but only the beginning of Sam's personal struggle to come to terms with queerness as a whole, as the rest of the episode deals with him balancing his newly found acceptance with the intolerance of the Cheers' regulars.

⁶¹ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 201-3.

⁶² *Cheers*, "The Boys in the Bar," episode 116.

⁶³ Scott A. Smith, "DSM-III and Homosexuality," *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services* 26, no. 1 (January 1988): 39, accessed April 12, 2015, ProQuest 5000.

⁶⁴ *The Golden Girls*, "Isn't It Romantic?," episode 205, NBC, first broadcast November 8, 1986, directed by Terry Hughes. ; Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 273-9. In this episode, Jean, a lesbian, mourns the loss of her partner. The depiction of her sadness presents her loss as no different from the sadness of the widowed main character, Rose, therefore legitimizing Jean's sexuality to the audience through the association of one woman's loss to the other's. Additional examples of this occur in two later episodes of *The Golden Girls*, *Doogie Houser, MD*, *Designing Women* and of course, *Ellen*.

⁶⁵ *Cheers*, "The Boys in the Bar," episode 116.

The episode's emphasis on Sam's personal journey of coming to terms with Tom's sexuality exemplifies another typical sitcom technique, where a gay character only exists as an object for straight characters to react to.⁶⁶ In most episodes, the main character finds out someone is gay, is initially unaccepting, but by the end of the episode, comes to terms with homosexuality – all within the neat thirty minute bundle.⁶⁷ The *Cheers* episode is a slight variation on this, as Tom, being present only in the first half, is just the catalyst for the story and exhibits even less personal agency than if he were to be present for Sam's entire process. Instead, the episode is about Sam and the bar encountering the possibility of queerness and then coming to terms with it in the end. In some ways, it makes the story more accessible to those who would be uncomfortable with overt homosexuality, while still promoting tolerance and challenging heteronormativity.

After Tom's visit, the regulars become afraid that Sam's public acceptance of Tom will cause gays to flock to Cheers and turn it into a gay hotspot.⁶⁸ When they express this concern, the righteous Diane informs the group that there are gay people in Cheers all the time, including that very moment.⁶⁹ A gay witch-hunt ensues and the regulars decide that three well-dressed men who ordered light beer must be the homosexuals of whom Diane speaks.⁷⁰ They encourage Sam to kick them out of the bar but he refuses, resulting in the regulars tricking all the patrons into thinking the bar is closed and returning only once the men have left.⁷¹ Upon the regulars' return, Diane informs the group that those men were not the gay men she was talking about, but instead

⁶⁶ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 182.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 208-9.

⁶⁸ *Cheers*, "The Boys in the Bar," episode 116.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the gay men she referred to had been hanging out with the locals all night – prompting the two gay men to announce themselves and kiss Norm, the group’s ringleader, on the cheek.⁷²

The two gay men’s “concealment” within the locals, along with Tom’s previous performances of masculine promiscuity, is another set of common motifs. In many queer themed episodes, the gay characters are the least likely to be the ones seen as homosexuals.⁷³ In some ways, this is a powerful tool, as non-stereotypical gay characters demonstrate that it is often impossible to distinguish a person’s sexuality through their appearance and behavior. At the same time, however, emphasizing that there is no physical difference between hetero- and homosexuals can increase anxieties and make people skeptical and uneasy about not only how they perceive others, but also of how others perceive them.⁷⁴ As a possible result of this, the last queer themed episode of *Cheers* is rampant with gay stereotypes.

In the 1992 episode, “Rebecca’s Lover...Not,” Rebecca – the superintendent of the bar and essentially, Diane’s replacement as the voice of reason in the group of regulars – reunites with her high school boyfriend, Mark (played by Harvey Firestein), who happens to be flamboyantly gay.⁷⁵ Rebecca, however, is naïvely unaware of Mark’s sexuality and attempts at all costs to seduce him.⁷⁶ The episode is just one huge joke about how silly Rebecca is for not noticing that Mark is so obviously a homosexual. Furthermore, it seems like a lazy attempt by writers to have Harvey Firestein to come on the show without having to play a character any different than the character he always plays.

⁷² Ibid. The two gay men do not have any lines and it is unclear if the two actors retained their roles as background regulars throughout the rest of the series.

⁷³ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 192.

⁷⁴ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 211.

⁷⁵ *Cheers*, "Rebecca's Lover...Not," episode 1022, NBC, first broadcast April 23, 1992, directed by James Burrows.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

This episode demonstrates that the television device of tokenization had expanded to encompass homosexuals. Tokenism is a term that applies to the limited representation of a minority group as an attempt at political correctness and inclusion, which exists far beyond the realm of media.⁷⁷ In terms of television, tokenism refers to the presence of typically a single minority character who exists in the realm of the television show to add diversity, but who is also restricted and singled out by their difference.⁷⁸ Specifically, queer guest characters tend to be included in episodes as a novelty, with their story lines almost exclusively revolving around their sexuality.⁷⁹ This is certainly the case with “Rebecca’s Lover...Not,” as Harvey Firestien’s only purpose in the episode is to assist in delivering its ultimate punch line.

However, even this kind of token-based near representation has some redeeming factors. For one thing, everyone in the bar knows Mark is gay, yet none of them want to kick him out or are afraid of the consequences. This is remarkably different from “The Boys in the Bar,” which aired eight seasons prior. Yes, the patrons only know Mark is gay because he is playing into all the stereotypes of a typical gay man, like carrying a purse, being snarky and talking with his hands, but even still this demonstrates a much more widespread understanding and acceptance of homosexuality at its most basic level.

Although this chapter focuses primarily on *Cheers*, there are plenty of other sitcoms that have at least one episode that deals with queer guest characters.⁸⁰ These episodes showed up on series that no one would have expected to see gay content in, such as *The Love Boat* (and *Cheers*

⁷⁷ "Tokenism," in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, ed. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, 1, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://oxfordreference.com>.

⁷⁸ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 180.

⁷⁹ Colin Poppshed, "Media: Response: Beware of Tokenism," *The Guardian*(London), February 8, 2010, Final edition, 6, accessed April 12, 2015, LexisNexis Academic.

⁸⁰ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 182. From 1994-1999 for example over 40% of network shows had one or more queer themed episode.

for that matter), as well as shows that are now heavily associated with queerness, like *The Golden Girls*.⁸¹ In reference to this issue, Samuel A. Chambers states, “Heteronormativity can only be challenged by fighting the hegemony of heterosexuality, not merely by constructing tiny islands of homonormativity.”⁸² To expand on this, demonstrating queerness in a primarily heterosexual series prevents the subject matter from seriously challenging heteronormativity, because ninety-nine percent of the time the series upholds traditional, heteronormative social constructs.⁸³ The infrequency with which queer subject matter is encountered in television series as a whole maintains homosexuals as “others,” despite the progressiveness – or lack there of – of the individual representations. Because of this, one must observe these individual episodes as near-representations in both a micro and macro sense by considering the impact they had when they aired, as well as the sustained impact they may or may not have had in the entire series as a whole. In this regard, the episodes of *Cheers*, “The Boys in the Bar” and “Rebecca’s Lover...Not,” can be contrasted because of their very different individual handlings of queer guest characters, while simultaneously being understood to have little influence in the overall series’ structure and voice.

⁸¹ Caputo, *Alternate Channels*, 200, 356.

⁸² Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, 61n4.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 74-75. This fact is part of the reason why *The Golden Girls* is considered a queer classic, despite having very few queer (as defined as homosexual) themed episodes. *The Golden Girls*, is a decidedly queer show in that it not only depicts four older women (a typically desexualized group) as complete sexual humans, but also because the fact that they live alone, without any men, operates as a constant challenge to heteronormative social constructs of womanhood.

Chapter Three

The Limits of Televised Queer Intimacy

By the 1990s, sitcoms were no longer shying away from including queer characters. Whether recurring or guest starring, many shows had some sort of queer representation in at least one episode. Although shows were including gay characters, they still were not fully representing those character's lives through the display of physical intimacy. Two shows that are notable for their strong presence of queer characters, but failure to show intimacy between them are *Roseanne* and *Friends*.

Roseanne is an interesting show in that, at the height of its popularity in its fifth season (1992), the previously straight, recurring character of Nancy Bartlett comes out as a lesbian.⁸⁴ Remarkably, Nancy remains a recurring character on the show, appearing over twenty more times before the end of the series and receiving a wealth of storylines that identify her with qualities beyond just her sexuality.⁸⁵ Yet despite the positive representation of Nancy as a queer character on the show, she is never shown engaging in any form of physical queer intimacy. For an audience today, this lack of intimacy could be disconcerting. However, during *Roseanne*'s run, it may not have been possible to show Nancy kissing another woman, let alone in bed with one or in any situation insinuating same-sex physical intimacy. *Roseanne* did not, however, disregard queer intimacy entirely. Rather, the show arguably transferred the expectation and desire for intimacy between Nancy and her partners onto an episode that featured a kiss between Roseanne and Nancy's girlfriend Sharon (played by guest star Mariel Hemingway).

⁸⁴ *Roseanne*, "Ladies' Choice," episode 508, ABC, first broadcast November 10, 1992, directed by Andrew D. Weyman.

⁸⁵ "Roseanne," Internet Movie Database, accessed February 2, 2015.

The aforementioned season six episode, called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” was incredibly popular, often cited as a quintessential “lesbian kiss episode.” The term “lesbian kiss episode” refers to a television episode in which a main character and a guest star character engage in a kiss that is heavily rumored or advertised prior to the episode’s airing.⁸⁶ Often a “sweeps week” ratings ploy, the lesbian kiss episode is considered to be a cheap ruse. To some extent, these episodes can be exploitative and tacky, but not all of them can be reduced to such criticism.⁸⁷ In terms of *Roseanne*’s lesbian kiss episode, it actually can be considered revolutionary for the display of queer intimacy on the show.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” as an episode and as a kiss scene, is not particularly grand, but it does evidence the power of media hype. In the episode, Nancy invites Roseanne and her sister Jackie to go dancing with her new girlfriend, Sharron, at a gay club.⁸⁸ At the club Roseanne and Sharron have a great time together, which culminates in Sharron kissing Roseanne.⁸⁹ Roseanne does not enjoy the kiss and is quite freaked by the event, initially worrying about how Nancy would feel. After Nancy finds out, the writers reveal that Roseanne is not as progressive as Nancy once thought, and maybe has a bit more growing to do.⁹⁰ Watching the episode today, it is shocking that it had the impact that it did. Roseanne Barr engaged in a very public battle with ABC over the episode, at one point threatening to pull the whole episode if it did not air with the

⁸⁶ Virginia Heffernan, "Critic's Notebook; It's February. Pucker Up, TV Actresses," *The New York Times* (New York), February 10, 2005, n.pg, accessed February 1, 2015. Other programs that utilized this ruse include *Sex and the City*, *Friends* and most famously, *Ally McBeal*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Roseanne*, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," episode 618, ABC, first broadcast March 1, 1994, directed by Philip Charles MacKenzie.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

kiss.⁹¹ Because of this controversy, the episode ended up being the highest rated program the week it aired and won the ratings war against the Grammy Awards, which aired on the same night.⁹²

The lesbian kiss episode is certainly an example of near representation of queerness on television. Rather than having two actually queer characters kissing, the lesbian kiss episode generally displays intimacy between two women in a safer way, using a straight main character as a proxy for such intimacy. Although the kiss may confuse her at first, she ultimately remains straight in spite of it.⁹³ Though the act of two women kissing challenges heteronormativity, the function of a kiss in an episode is often to appeal to the male gaze, eroticizing the female same sex intimacy for the pleasure of a male viewer and resituating it well within the boundaries of heteronormative social constructs.⁹⁴ Lesbian kiss episodes are such a popular television trope that in Vincent Terrace's *Encyclopedia of Television Subjects, Themes and Settings*, the "Lesbians" section states that: "Also included are the historic lesbian kisses that have occurred on TV from 1977 to 2005."⁹⁵ The accompanying male homosexual section, "Gays," has no such mention of intimacy.⁹⁶ A large part of the problem with lesbian kiss episodes is that they are often an attempt to gain male viewers through their fetishization of female queerness, rather than

⁹¹ Chunovic, *One Foot on the Floor*, 109.

⁹² Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 209. ; "Few Protest Lesbian Kiss," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), March 3, 1994, sec. C, 2, accessed February 1, 2015, ProQuest 5000.

⁹³ Heffernan, "Critic's Notebook; It's February.," n.pg.

⁹⁴ Lynne Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," in *Queer TV*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (London: Routledge, 2009), 22.

⁹⁵ *Encyclopedia of Television Subjects, Themes and Settings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), s.v. "Lesbians," by Vincent Terrace.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

genuine portrayal of same-sex intimacy.⁹⁷ There is an, however, an aspect of questioning to each lesbian kiss episode and to some extent, the inclusion of such episodes are experimentations with queer intimacy within the shows themselves.

For many shows, it would have been too much to have actual queer characters kissing, so the lesbian kiss episode allows for a safer display of same sex intimacy. This is arguably the case in *Roseanne*, especially if one considers “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in terms of a later episode of *Roseanne*, in which the gay male character, Leon, marries his former fiancé Scott. At the end of the wedding episode, Leon and Scott engage in a kiss, though it is quite innocent.⁹⁸ The lesbian kiss *Roseanne* engaged in two seasons prior undoubtedly made Leon and Scott’s kiss possible, a fact that is immediately referred to following their kiss. Dan, Roseanne’s husband, feels uncomfortable by the two men kissing, which results in the following scene with a cameo appearance by Mariel Hemmingway:

DAN: Man, there’s the kiss. I was wondering if they were gonna do it and they’re doing it – look at them going at it.

ROSEANNE: They are not going at it, Dan. It just happens to be two people of the same sex kissing and there’s nothing wrong with that.

MARIEL HEMMINGWAY enters and sits behind Roseanne.

MARIEL: Hi.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Kathleen A. Brown and Brett Westbrook, "Love's Narrative Lost: Romance Interrupted in The L Word," in *Queer Love In Film and Television*, ed. Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.

⁹⁸ *Roseanne*, "December Bride," episode 811, ABC, first broadcast December 12, 1995, directed by Gail Mancuso.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

The audience and Roseanne hoot and holler when Hemmingway, who may or may not be playing her character, Sharron, from “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” enters.¹⁰⁰ This use of self-referential humor proves that the writers and Roseanne herself were aware of the power of their lesbian kiss episode, and its ability to open up possibilities for further displays of queer intimacy among all sexes on television.

The *Roseanne* lesbian kiss episode is not completely guiltless though, as it is only a near representation of queerness. There is still an aspect of the episode that seems to capitalize on its male audience and present the two women kissing for the purpose of heteronormative pleasure. This appeal to the male gaze is exemplified by a conversation between Dan and Roseanne at the end of the episode. The conversation occurs during the couple’s post-coital pillow talk when a guilty Roseanne tells Dan that someone kissed her.¹⁰¹ Dan is initially angry when he believes a man kissed Roseanne but once she tells him it was Sharron he becomes aroused and begins asking her questions about it, many of which are loaded with stereotypes such as “I suppose she was one of those blonde hard bodies who can just walk up and kiss some woman. Did you see her kissing anybody else?”¹⁰² Roseanne, however, shuts Dan down by describing men dancing and kissing, which causes him to turn on the lights and end their encounter.¹⁰³ This final scene demonstrates that the episode was skating the line between exploitative and progressive. The lesbian kiss may have been a ratings ploy, but it was also a real attempt at displaying queer intimacy on television, even if it was in part for the benefit male viewers. Additionally, when Roseanne describes men kissing at the club, she is demonstrating the hypocrisy of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *Roseanne*, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," episode 618.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

eroticization of female same-sex intimacy, in effect challenging it while also remaining firmly in its bounds. The display of queer intimacy between one straight and one gay character, it seems, is less exploitative when it occurs in a program that has actual reoccurring gay characters. In many ways some intimacy is better than none at all.

The ending of “December Bride” is a seemingly innocent joke about the hoopla surrounding the kiss in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” but it is also quite pertinent to the public representation of homosexuality at the time. Roseanne’s comment about nothing being wrong with two people of the same sex kissing is a jab at the critics and advertisers who saw the lesbian kiss two seasons prior as problematic. Roseanne’s comment also confronted television’s tendency to leave out queer intimacy. Though her comment may not have been a direct blow, it is difficult to watch “December Bride” without thinking of the episode of *Friends*, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding” that aired a little over a month after the *Roseanne* episode.

In “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” Ross’s ex-wife Carol marries the woman she left Ross for, Susan.¹⁰⁴ The episode, which featured the first lesbian wedding on television, is noteworthy because of its absence of a kiss at the conclusion of the ceremony.¹⁰⁵ In discussing the lack of a kiss at the conclusion of another televised gay wedding, Stephen Tropiano poses an interesting question: “Is the absence of a kiss at the end of the ceremony noticeable? ...have you ever been to a wedding where the couple didn’t kiss at the end of the ceremony?”¹⁰⁶ It is quite odd to leave out a kiss at the end of a wedding and it does not go unnoticed in the episode. At one

¹⁰⁴ *Friends*, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” episode 211, NBC, first broadcast January 18, 1996, directed by Thomas Schlamme. For clarifications sake, all *Friends* episodes are titled as “The One with...” so despite the fact that it seems quite pointed to identify the episode solely due to the queer content, it is not at all atypical for the series.

¹⁰⁵ *Encyclopedia of Television Subjects*, s.v. “Lesbians.”

¹⁰⁶ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 135.

point, following the ceremony the two women, while posing for pictures, look as if they are going to kiss but stop short – almost as if someone from behind the camera signaled for them to not touch lips.¹⁰⁷ There is a sense of sweetness to the episode, which shows the unique love between Ross, Carol, Susan and their son Ben – but there is just that one piece missing, the piece that would make the relationship real: the actual kiss to sanctify the marriage between the two women.

It is interesting to think of this episode of *Friends* in reference to the overall trajectory of the show, which is quite progressive in its display of Carol and Susan's same sex relationship. Though *Friends* does not have any queer regulars, its portrayal of Carol and Susan's relationship is a fundamental part of the pilot and was treated with a fair amount of respect for the first few seasons until it was no longer relevant to the story. *Friends* falls short of a full representation of queer intimacy in "The One With the Lesbian Wedding" when it excludes the kiss. It could be argued, however, that *Friends* shows queerness in non-traditional ways, and therefore displays queer intimacy. For instance, the relationship between Joey and Chandler is one of the great "bromances" of 1990s sitcoms, so much so that their relationship is often compared to a romantic one in certain episodes.¹⁰⁸ In some ways, the identification of Chandler and Joey's relationship as homosexual could be an example of near representation as well. Although they were never actually gay, the closeness between the two could allow for queer viewers to identify with them. On the other hand, the lack of actual homosexuality in Chandler and Joey's relationship challenges heteronormative constructs that suggest that two men cannot be platonic friends. Journeying into subtext is quite a difficult task, however, and it should only be explored in

¹⁰⁷ *Friends*, "The One with the Lesbian," episode 211.

¹⁰⁸ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 216.

reference to shows that also included gay recurring or starring characters. Otherwise, one could start reading homosexuality into every possible avenue. Who would want to start viewing Joey and Danny from *Full House* as possible lovers? (Though it could be argued that the inclusion of Uncle Jesse in the house was an attempt to re-heterosexualize the environment...)

Queer intimacy on television is a hard subject to explore in sitcoms prior to, and even after, the new millennium. The limitations imposed by networks at the time, as well as the power of safely orienting same-sex intimacy for a male gaze, did not allow for fully honest representations of queer intimacy amongst actual queer people. However, there were significant gains over time, even if they were slightly exploitative. Near representations of queer intimacy can be considered significant, depending on their specific settings. *Roseanne* had a near representation of intimacy that was a redirection of the desire for intimacy between Nancy and another woman, which ultimately resulted in a genuine display of love between two queer characters. *Friends*, on the other hand, lacked the physical representation of love between its queer characters but still managed to portray well-rounded, potentially romantic, same-sex relationships. These episodes, though short of the desired end point, were significant milestones of near representation that would lead up to, and allow for, fuller representations of queerness on television today.

Chapter Four

The Post-Ellen Revolution?

In 1997, one controversy dominated popular culture: the imminent coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and Ellen Morgan, the character DeGeneres played on her television show *Ellen*.¹⁰⁹ DeGeneres' show was entering its fourth season and was desperate to find a constant identity.¹¹⁰ The show's lack of identity stemmed directly from DeGeneres' own ambiguous sense of self. A comedian with a large gay following, DeGeneres avoided stand up material that situated her in the realm of any sexual preference, but because of the demands of television conventions, she was unable to avoid the topic of sexuality in her show.¹¹¹ For the first two seasons, Ellen was presented as a straight woman struggling to navigate the dating world, but this display was faulty on multiple levels.¹¹² There was a blaring lack of chemistry between Ellen and her suitors, a fact that was played upon in many of the episodes.¹¹³ Because of this lack of chemistry, Ellen could not sustain a relationship with any man, which prevented the show from having a central romantic plot. Furthermore, DeGeneres herself was uncomfortable with the love scenes, which only added to the visible lack of chemistry.¹¹⁴ Clearly no one believed the straight Ellen, so for the third season Ellen was stripped of any and all sexual identity and became more of a childlike character that observed others' romantic relationships but had no interest in one herself.¹¹⁵ This too was an issue, as audiences had grown to expect a romantic plot from sitcoms. It was clear

¹⁰⁹ Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*, 378.

¹¹⁰ Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," in *Queer TV*, 34.

¹¹¹ Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*, 379.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 381.

¹¹³ *Ellen*, "A Kiss is Still A Kiss," episode 103, ABC, first broadcast April 6, 1994, directed by Andrew D. Weyman, written by Suzanne Martin. In this episode Ellen begins an otherwise perfect relationship with a terrible kisser.

¹¹⁴ Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*, 381.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*.

that both heteronormativity and ambiguity were not options, and it was decided in the fourth season Ellen would come out of the closet as a lesbian.¹¹⁶

This decision launched a months' long controversy packed with rumors about DeGeneres and Ellen's coming out.¹¹⁷ The storyline was leaked quite early in the season, which would have been fine had the season maintained its original timeline where Ellen would come out mid-season. However, Disney/ABC executives did not approve the coming out episode for quite some time, which resulted in an exhaustive build up to late April.¹¹⁸ The whole season was a set up for a gay punch-line, a fact that would make one think it would not have a satisfying pay off. But possibly because of all the time the writers had to create the episode, "The Puppy Episode" was a captivating, sensitive, and humorous hour of television.¹¹⁹ Also, because of the hype surrounding it, the episode gave ABC its highest ratings of the season with the exception of the Academy Awards.¹²⁰ Although the remaining two episodes of the season were of slightly less comparable ratings, the show was quickly renewed for a fifth season.¹²¹

"The Puppy Episode" is considered a landmark event in queer television. It marked the first time a developed main character came out on a show.¹²² Furthermore, the following season focused on real queer issues, which proved that queer-centric television could be produced. Initially, DeGeneres and ABC executives agreed that there would not be any kissing between women, as the show would not be about a lesbian, but just feature one. However, during the summer hiatus, DeGeneres came to terms with the power of the medium and decided to create a

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 383.

¹¹⁷ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 164.

¹¹⁸ Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*, 387.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 394.

¹²¹ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 166.

¹²² Ibid, 164.

lesbian-centric show that was true to herself and her journey.¹²³ The show was canceled at the end of the fifth season and many believe because it had become “too gay” and therefore a “one joke sitcom.”¹²⁴ This is a hard point to prove, but there are aspects of Ellen’s new sexual identity that definitely played into the shows cancelation. For instance, much of the final season surrounds Ellen falling in love with Laurie. In an attempt to remain true to queer sexuality, the writers did not stay away from a true depiction of queer relationships, complete with frank discussions of intimacy and plenty of kisses.¹²⁵ This resulted in ABC putting a parental guidance disclaimer before any episodes involving queer intimacy, and the show was given a TV-14 rating purely because of the lesbian content.¹²⁶

What is interesting about *Ellen* is that its failure was a direct result of its successful and true portrayal of a homosexual relationship. Many scholars cite Ellen Morgan’s coming out as the pivotal event in queer television and claim it to be responsible for the creation of the popular queer-centric shows of the 2000s.¹²⁷ In fact, there is an entire lesbian pop culture website called *afterellen.com* that argues that Ellen’s coming out had a liberating effect on queer pop culture – uniting a previously marginalized and isolated group under one fearless leader.¹²⁸ However, what people see as a landmark moment in television is in fact a giant and glaring failure at incorporating queer lifestyles onto mainstream television. For many, *Ellen* marks the beginning

¹²³ Becca Cragin, "Lesbians and Serial TV: *Ellen* Finds Her Inner Adult," in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television*, ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2006), 201, 204.

¹²⁴ Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," in *Queer TV*, 37. ; Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*, 400.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

¹²⁶ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight*, 169. TV Shows rarely received these disclaimers even when the content was much more violent or graphically sexual.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

¹²⁸ AfterEllen, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://www.afterellen.com/>.

of “good” representations of queer people on television. This is true to some extent, but *Ellen*’s failure is an indicator of more. It demonstrates the need for near representation as a placeholder for full representation until there is the proper space for queerness on television. *Ellen*’s last season is certainly the first full representation of queerness on television, but the series as a whole, as well as the circumstances of its cancelation, also qualify it as a near representation.

Near representation takes into account the external aspects surrounding a representation. When a show is canceled for being “too gay,” it demonstrates that the public was not ready for such a full representation, and perhaps a smaller scale queer story would have been better received. Furthermore, viewing *Ellen* as an entire series certainly shows that it is in part a near representation, as the sexuality issues in the first three seasons are blatant examples of near representation. This is especially apparent in the third season where Ellen ceases to be a sexual person and stops dating men. Having a gay woman’s character need to stop dating men because of the she is uncomfortable in her portrayal is an example of near representation. Many queer people can “play straight” and do, including DeGeneres’ now wife Portia De Rossi, who at the time was playing an extremely heterosexual woman on *Ally McBeal*. Ellen not being able to “play straight” prevents queer people from being seen as actors independent of their own preferences. Additionally, the issues surrounding the intimacy between Ellen and Laurie, mainly the disclaimer that appeared at the beginning of any episode that displayed romantic contact between the two, firmly planted the show in the near representation camp, despite the actual content being fully representative.

What *Ellen* then proves is that near representations can be a powerful force in inciting change. *Ellen* did open doors for other shows and it did prove that homosexuality was a

reasonable topic for television, but it did not do this through success. There is something in the lack of success that allows for a more meaningful and exploratory look into queerness that would not be successful if every depiction were “accurate.” To be a positive portrayal of queerness, the representation would have to fall into pre-established heteronormative dialect, which it can never truly fit into because of the blaring differences between hetero and homosexual life.

Furthermore, there is an aspect to the failure that allows for a discussion and discovery of a different type of success. Judith Halberstam discusses this idea in her book *The Queer Art of Failure* saying, “...failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”¹²⁹ In some ways it is better to just do something than to try to get it perfect.¹³⁰ *Ellen* as a full representation took a leap of faith to make queerness on television acceptable. Although content-wise it was successful in full representation, the outside factors which qualify it as a near representation reestablish that the world is not ready for a full representation just yet. Only through the failures of full representations, and through the continued existence of more progressive near representations, will the norms ever be challenged enough to fully incorporate queerness into the medium.

¹²⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 12. Here I am applying Halberstam’s mention of a feminist Egyptian who decided to give up on mastering her religion in order to engage in different types of Islam to near representation.

Conclusion

One of the major problems of reading television through a queer lens is the urge one has to qualify a portrayal with positive or negative language. This is such a pervasive issue that the majority of queer television scholars fall victim to evaluations of success and failure rather than investigating both sides within a show.¹³¹ The beauty of near representation is that it removes the need to comprehensively describe a show in this language – instead allowing for a dialogue about the aspects of a show that are positive or negative, while recognizing that there is always value in any sort of queer portrayal. This thesis is an attempt to prove the value of near representation, through a discussion of both oft-cited queer portrayals and lesser-known ones. Simultaneously, it is an attempt to show the value in all different types of queer portrayals. In conclusion I will summarize the effects of each type of near representation I discussed in terms of their relationship to *Ellen*, and ultimately the new era of queer television that *Ellen* ushered in.

The first section about questioning is interesting to look at in terms of *Ellen*, in that in many ways the pilot episode of *The Facts of Life* is a more accurate depiction of questioning than *Ellen* as a whole. The experience of questioning is shown with more detail than it is in the *Ellen* episode, but at the same time the result is vastly different. This shows that there is always value in queer themes, regardless of the outcome. When looking at the second section, about single-episode gay story lines, it is easy for one to become frustrated with the short-term visibility of gay characters. However, in many ways these single episodes can be somewhat groundbreaking, as in the case of the “The Boys in the Bar.” Episodes like this tested audiences’ ability to handle queer storylines and conditioned them to be comfortable with queerness. At the same time, however, there is failure in only having a few queer themed episodes, especially if those episodes

¹³¹ Keller and Stratyner, introduction to *The New Queer Aesthetic*, 1-2.

tokenize queerness, as is the case with “Rebecca’s Lover...Not.” Regardless, episodes like this opened doors and allowed for series to play with longer queer storylines, which eventually allowed for a queer main character in *Ellen*.

In exploring the third section on queer intimacy, it is important to note that if it were not for the subtextual or appropriate queer intimacy of *Roseanne* and even *Friends*, the last season of *Ellen* could have become a sexless near representation of queerness. These groundbreaking portrayals shattered the barrier preventing queer intimacy, but in some ways *Ellen*’s display of actual romantic intimacy repaired that barrier because the trend did not last in other gay themed network programming. *Will & Grace*, a show often cited as a direct result of the *Ellen* gay liberation, is a prime example of a hotly debated show that struggled to represent queer intimacy even though it had a very queer premise.¹³² The main character, Will, was rarely seen in any remotely sexual situations, with critics claiming him, “as a sexual eunuch who had to be erotically castrated in order to craft a broadcast-friendly representation of a gay male identity.”¹³³ However, the lack of intimacy between the gay main character Will and his boyfriends is somewhat adjusted by the fierce sexual innuendos of the other gay main character, Jack. This opens up debate on whether sexual intimacy can only be represented through physicality or if language can also serve as a vehicle in which to display intimacy.

This point is brought up not for further discussion, but to prove that the post-*Ellen* revolution is just as uncertain of a time as the pre-*Ellen* era. There are many aspects of post-*Ellen* queer portrayals that can be debated and discussed, but that does not delegitimize the power of

¹³² Caputo, *Alternate Channels*, 405.

¹³³ Ben Aslinger, “It’s Not So Easy For Two Men To Be A Couple’ : Revisiting Gay Dating in *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*,” in *Queer Love in Film and Television*, ed. Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 60.

Ellen's coming out. Furthermore, it is important to discuss queer portrayals and discover the good and bad in them, because that is the only way to discover what a true and authentic depiction of queerness looks like. The only way to define accurate terms to discuss and explore queer pop culture is through discussion, critical thinking, and the creation of content that feels true to a queer person on an individual level in the hopes that future sitcoms abandon the modifier "queer" when describing their characters and storylines.

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