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Francesca Petronio

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RAISED ON TV: A QUEER TEEN'S GUIDE TO SYNDICATED  
SEXUALITIES

by

FRANCESCA PETRONIO

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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PETRONIO

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Raised on TV: A Queer Teen's Guide to Syndicated Sexualities

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Francesca Petronio

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Thesis Advisor

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

Raised on TV: A Queer Teen's Guide to Syndicated Sexualities

by

Francesca Petronio

Advisor: James Wilson

This thesis explores the contemporary landscape of LGBTQ adolescent television programming over the past decade. Applying a three-pronged approach to media content analysis—emphasizing a textual reading of the series, the networks' political economy of production, and audience reception among scholars, culture critics and fans—the author provides both surface and symptomatic readings of Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), MTV's *Faking It* (2014-2016), and ABC's *The Real O'Neals* (2016-2017). Thematically and chronologically, this period of programming spans the end of what has been called the gay-positive era, characterized by the politics of anti-bullying campaigns, and the emerging post-gay genre, born after the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense Of Marriage Act. This new, often controversial generation of post-gay programming appears untethered to what Ellis Hanson dubbed the “moralistic politics of representation,” and is instead free to satire the traditional signifiers of the gay experience in adolescence, including the coming-out story arc, social disenfranchisement at school, and familial rejection.

On the contrary, the post-gay genre offers queer queen bees and bullies, teenagers pretending and learning to be gay for popularity, sexually fluid adolescents who evade labels and never perform coming-out, and kitsch cultural insiders at the heart of mainstream, middle American family sitcoms. As is common for declarations of temporal distance from an historical

struggle, (post-race, for example), the introduction of post-gay television was met with skepticism, and outright rejection. *Faking It* and *The Real O'Neals* were skewered by activist-journalists and online fandom communities, and both were canceled prematurely. Despite the short shelf life of this generation of queer teen television, these series reveal the polyvalence of the discourse of sexuality, fluctuating between past and future, pride and shame, progressive and regressive, and reimagining the “gay experience” for Generation Z. Weaving the theoretical interventions of Esther Saxey, Jason Jacobs, Jack Halberstam, Tison Pugh, and Ann Pellegrini throughout, the author playfully interrogates the relationship between popular culture, homosexuality and mainstream American values.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Jim Wilson, a kindred spirit who has supported me since that fateful first day at the GC when I sat in his joyful Intro to Gender and Sexuality Studies course. Our love of musical theater and smart scatological humor brought us together, and his warm words, that “an advisor is for life,” carried me through.

I am deeply grateful to the Liberal Studies Department, especially our cackling Kathy Koutsis, the best Assistant Program Officer on this side of the Jersey Shore, and her generous heart and curious mind. Kathy and our resident rabbit aficionado, Executive Officer Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, made this MA program feel like home.

Thank you to my dear friends, colleagues and superiors (though they hate when I call them that) in the Registrar’s Office, for their constant support and eagerness to engage in spirited discussion over Kinder Bueno, ginger tea, and undressed kale.

In *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*, Tison Pugh expands John Ellis’s conception of television’s flow to account not merely for the medium of consumption (from a shared TV in the family living room, to an iPhone screen streaming Netflix) but to encompass “the periods of one’s personal viewing history” (24). Pugh riffs, “not only do television’s technological iterations affect the perception of a program, but so, too, do the shifts in identity registered in the individuals consuming television programs- a likelihood given that viewers might watch the same show over several decades of their lives.” (24).

For this reason, I am compelled to thank weepy nights in high school watching *Dawson's Creek's* Jack McPhee on DVD, as he masochistically ordered his father to “ask me the question.” I am indebted to seven years of *Pretty Little Liars*, which carried me from the summer of my high school graduation, to the first year of graduate school, with its motley crew of vengeful queer girls who traded victimhood for the black hoodie of the A team. I am grateful to everyone, throughout the flow of my life, who watched queer teen TV with me, from my family, my *fidanzata*, my elder dykes in Maine, the Lamont NAT Club at Smith College, and my associates scattered around the world who despite different time zones, always found ways to stream our shows.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction to The Guide

Kenny O'Neal, altar boy, class treasurer, and Elks Club teen of the month, has so many questions about being gay. Is he a bear, a wolf, a silver fox, a dolphin, a giraffe? He'd be a deer in headlights without the guidance of queer teen TV! Those of us who grew up with the slushy stained, musical misfits of *Glee* might be surprised to see what makes the cut for Generation Z. While the late 90's and early 2000's constituted the era of gay-positive programing, emphasizing that this crush is so not a phase, with Gaga singing that we were born this way, more recent programming is challenging ontologized gay identity. This thesis closely examines three such TV shows which reveal shifting American attitudes towards sexuality and so-called gay subculture.

Long gone are the story arcs about the marginality of gay teenagers, on the outskirts of the church and the family, instead we have ABC's *The Real O'Neals*, "Just your typical all-American, Catholic, divorcing, disgraced, lawbreaking, gay family." This series effectively queers the American sitcom, infusing camp and kitsch with formulaic family fiascos. ABC brings gay subculture to the center of mainstream, Middle America, with protagonist and narrator Kenny O'Neal, a sweet, sassy, self-absorbed gay teen Moses as our guide through his wacky family of straight oafs and original Catholic gangsters.

Long gone are the story arcs about the traditional coming-out narrative of an adolescent who has a queer feeling and struggles to communicate her new identity to the world. Instead we have *Faking It*, MTV's romantic comedy about two best friends who are mistakenly presumed to be lesbian by their progressive high school, and must contemplate coming-out as *straight*. Described by the token conservative mean girl from Dallas, who happens to be the first Intersex series regular on television played by an intersex actor, Hester is a "Kumbaya, socialist freakshow of a high school" where diversity is a prerequisite to popularity. Childhood BFFs Karma and Amy

ascend to adolescent stardom as Hester's cutest couple, and the first same-gender Homecoming Queens. Everything is smooth sailing until Amy discovers she does have feelings for her best friend and must explore coming out as bisexual, questioning, queer, and eventually herself to a school that already thinks she's gay.

Long gone are the story arcs about the scared queer teen bullied into the closet, instead we have Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars*, a mystery thriller dominated by a motley crew of queer queen bees and villains. In a suburb like Rosewood, you might not expect a lesbian bar, or a body bag to fall out of your wine cooler, but you should expect the subversion of gay victimhood. These sophomore sleuths scheme in the shadows while caressing their girlfriends' hands, without ever having to label themselves. You'll find plenty of acronyms, from the notorious NAT surveillance club, poorly translated from Latin as We See All (Nos Animadverto Totus), or the bone chilling initials A.D. of the cyber stalker and killer, but don't expect to see LGBT—that is so 2010.

These changes in media representation have some calling the past five years the era of "Post-Gay" television, in which traditional signifiers of homosexuality have disappeared or become self-ironic, passé tropes. These three series were skewered by fans on sites dedicated to queer popular culture, and *The Real O'Neals* and *Faking It*, the two most recent series, were both canceled prematurely. Critical fans argued that our culture is not yet post-gay, and question whether this trend of not labeling or coming-out, or mocking the coming out process, is a return to the repressive dynamics that kept characters in the closet decades earlier. Do these contemporary shows mirror Generation Z's labeling practices, and understandings of identity and community that are just *too queer* for the rest of us? What does this era expose about American attitudes towards homosexuality and gay subculture? Was the revolution finally televised? And please, how do I know if I'm the dolphin? Better crack open the Guide and see what's inside!

## Terminology and Concepts

I would like to open the introduction by providing a basic framework for my research, as well as some vocabulary, beginning with the term “Guide.” The title of this thesis plays with the, by now, retrograde concept of the TV Guide which provided a listing of every show on every network in every timeslot. “Guide” also suggests an informed opinion about the topic—in this case, queer adolescent programming—and a nod to popular culture’s evaluation of what is worth watching. This fusion of academia and popular culture, however, rejects placing value judgements on these visual texts, and instead analyzes the discourses which shape their content, and audience reception. Readers seeking a guide for “the best” televised representations of queer adolescence would be better off consulting the websites of media watchdogs, for this project interrogates the logic behind presumably positive portrayals, and allegedly authentic articulations.

The title and tone of the thesis were inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay,”<sup>1</sup> a sharp tongue-in-cheek critique of the evolving psychological literature on homosexuality and youth. In 1991, Sedgwick imagines the shift in paradigm required for a society to raise gay kids, or bring their kids up to be gay. In 2018, I respond to Sedgwick’s original query by examining the generation raised on television—and social media—whose understandings of sexuality and identity are shaped by media narratives, and the online communities built around popular queer content. The “syndicated sexualities” thus refers both to network syndication, and the process by which narratives about sexuality are shared en masse via popular culture.

Despite a reference to teenagers throughout, this study acknowledges, and embraces, the intergenerational demographics of viewers who consume these media narratives, including the author herself. A premise of the coming-out genre, as will be explored further in the next chapter,

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay,” *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 18-27.

relies on the use of adolescence to communicate the experience of queer desire and identification. Furthermore, queer identified adults may yearn to watch the youth they imagined, that they were not able to enjoy as sexually repressed or inexperienced teenagers. By considering teenagers, and adolescence more broadly, this thesis seeks to consider the role of generation in shaping narratives of sexuality. This question of generation encompasses eras of television programming, as well as generations of fans who have a varied, evolving relationship to LGBT themes. These queer generations allow us to reflect on the past, and imagine the future of the so-called gay experience, alongside other signifiers of homosexuality such as the coming-out ritual, the practice of self-labeling, and the perception of being a vulnerable minority amongst a hostile majority.

## **Methodology**

Media Content Analysis in this thesis relies loosely on the three-pronged approach<sup>2</sup> established by Wendy Kathleen Peters in her doctoral dissertation<sup>3</sup> on *Queer as Folk*, and Brunsdon and Spigel's *Feminist Television Criticism*<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1). This approach considers the role of the television networks (political economy of production), the content of the television shows (queer representations on *Pretty Little Liars*, *Faking It* and *The Real O'Neals*) and audience reception (the television recaps and comments on online forums dedicated to the series.)

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<sup>2</sup> This approach was used effectively by Caitlin Campisi in her doctoral dissertation about the intersection of homonational politics and media narratives of LGBTQ youth. Campisi's contribution to the literature inspired the inclusion of popular culture critics and their television recaps in this thesis. Caitlin Campisi, "Homonationalism on TV?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Queer and Trans\* Youth Representations on Mainstream Teen Television Shows," PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Kathleen Peters, "Our televisions, our selves: popular (in)visibility, marginalized identities and the Politics of Queer as Folk," PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon and Lynn Spiegl, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2008).

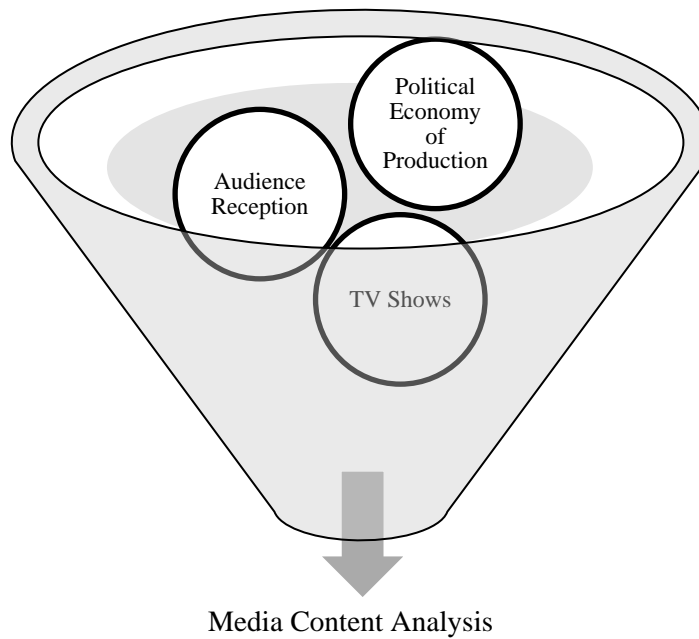


Fig. 1: “Methodology.” The three-pronged approach to media content analysis incorporates a textual reading of the series, an analysis of the networks and creatives that produce the shows, and a consideration of audience reception.

Analysis of the TV shows involves a consideration of dialogue and story-arcs, particularly those which express the series’ understanding of queer adolescent sexuality. Analysis of the political economy of production serves to put the TV shows in a larger context of the networks which produce them. This important facet of the three-pronged approach reminds viewers that the representations are created as marketable goods, with distinctive limitations on creative license. This involves a consideration of the writers and creators, the network executives, and finally the networks themselves (Freeform, previously branded as ABC Family, MTV, and ABC). This will also highlight the intentionality behind the representations, and parse cultural debates over the tokenization of queer identity for syndication.

Each variable in the three-pronged approach will not be applied equally to each series due to considerable differences in audience reception, particularly the lack of online communities dedicated to *The Real O’Neals*. The focus of this thesis remains the two most recent series, *Faking*

*It* and *The Real O'Neals*, with *Pretty Little Liars* providing the context for better understanding this generation of programming, and critical response among academics and queer media critics. The following section of the introduction will look at Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars*, and the subversion of the typical coming-out narrative which paved the way for series like *Faking It* and *The Real O'Neals*. As my analysis of *Pretty Little Liars* will uncover, programming in the mid 2010s began to experiment with rejecting the ontologized gay identity. The series was a trailblazer for other shows which went even further to treat queer adolescence not as a fragile, sacred theme, but as a cultural trope that could be riffed on, laughed at, and ultimately queered.

### **The Art of Lesbionage: Queer Victims and Villains in Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars***

*Pretty Little Liars* tells the story of four teenage girls, a group of friends marked by the disappearance of their queen bee. While grieving the loss of their manipulative and charismatic friend Alison DiLaurentis (Sasha Pieterse), the girls become the target of a seemingly omnipotent cyber bully who has constant surveillance over them, intimate access to their secrets, and a desire to wreak havoc in their lives. This texting menace is not unlike their old friend Alison who collected secrets, and people, to use as weapons in her social pawn game. At first, the girls even suspect that Allison is hiding and playing an elaborate trick on everyone, because this cyber stalker knows things that only *she* knew. Once her body is found, the four girls, Spencer Hastings (Troian Bellsario), Hanna Marin (Ashley Benson), Emily Fields (Shay Mitchell) and Aria Montgomery (Lucy Hale), come to terms with the death of their "frienemy" and the reality that a stranger seems to know everything about them.

As the show proceeds, this masked, hooded figure, known only as "A," and later as "A.D." reveals itself to be a skilled killer. In a complicated series of dreams and hallucinations which end up being real, the girls realize Alison is actually alive and has been in hiding to protect herself. The



girls must decide how much they can trust their old friend, and how to keep her safe enough so that she may return to Rosewood. This group of five powerful female protagonists barely has time to go to first period with their constant sleuthing, desperately trying to discover the identity of the person who has been tormenting them since the summer of Alison's disappearance.

*Pretty Little Liars* was the first show on ABC Family (the network now known as Free Form) to feature a lesbian protagonist, one of four high school girls growing up in the small, fictional suburb of Rosewood, PA. At a time when organizations like GLAAD stressed the importance of positive media narratives about LGBT youth, in light of the perceived spike in suicides, *PLL* gave us Emily Fields, a mixed race Filipina girl who was swim captain, a loyal friend, and wanted to kiss other girls. *Pretty Little Liars* diligently covered Emily's process of self-discovery, from stolen kisses inside the proverbial closet, to her coming-out as a lesbian, proud of her identity, but reminding friends and viewers that she, and other LGBTQ youth, are just like everyone else.

The national rhetoric seemed to dramatically change in the years that followed, with the federal legalization of gay marriage, the ever-growing number of celebrities coming out as bisexual, gay, or queer, and the softening of labels that define gender identity and sexual orientation. As the political climate changed, so did the representation of sexuality on *Pretty Little Liars*. This transformation increased the number of non-straight female characters (both cis and trans), but also changed the narrative of their stories from the traditional coming-out-of-the-closet, fixed identity tale, to a more fluid, queer depiction that may mirror the lived experiences of many of the younger fans. At its conclusion in 2017, *Pretty Little Liars* offered fans not just one but a dozen female characters that live and love queerly without labels, and without pressure in the story arc to define themselves.

*Pretty Little Liars* was one of the first shows of its kind to feature so many queer female

characters, and exclude internal commentary in the show about the characters' sexualities. The literature demonstrates that even scholars who purport to look beyond the coming-out ritual in representations of non-heterosexual characters often rely on the coming-out story arc as a signifier for queerness, to the neglect of more subtle representations which lack any kind of internal commentary about diversity. These subtler, ambiguous representations are viewed with suspicion, or not at all, by more traditional sources, and at times celebrated, or demonized by the community of fans.

*Pretty Little Liars* had a total of 12 queer women on the show including two protagonists, four antagonists, and various transitory characters who spruced up Rosewood's lesbian bar, and other main locales, from season to season. Of the dozen, only 2 characters, Emily Fields and her first serious girlfriend, Paige McCullers, were given a coming-out story arc. The others never performed coming-out and were never formally labeled as "gay" or "lesbian" or "bisexual" or "queer." Instead, their relationships were merely revealed on screen through displays of physical intimacy, and later confirmed by dialogues identifying the characters as being or having been in a relationship.

Perhaps the most understated and unexpected revelation was that of Jenna Marshall (Tammin Sursok) and Shana Fring (Aeriél Miranda). Jenna is immediately established as an adversary who was blackmailed, and eventually blinded by Alison and her minions in a prank gone terribly wrong. She has, up until this exposure, only been shown to be attracted to boys and men. Shana, on the other hand, formerly a close friend of Alison's, is said to have dated Paige McCullers the summer she and Emily temporarily broke up. The series hints at a romantic relationship between Jenna and Shana when the two are shown sitting together at a picnic table holding hands and plotting against Alison (Figure 2).



Fig. 2: “Lesbionage.” Jenna (left) caresses Shana (right) at their secret spot in the woods, subtly revealing an unexpected queer relationship. I. Marlene King, “A Dangerous Game,” *Pretty Little Liars*, season 3, episode 24, directed by Patrick Norris, aired March 19, 2013. Unless otherwise specified, all screen grabs were captured by the author from *Pretty Little Liars* on Netflix.

*Pretty Little Liars* ultimately confirms the instincts of fans that such scenes which represent queer attraction should be interpreted as such, even without the traditional sign posting, and use of the coming-out narrative. To the relief of many fans who feared gaybaiting, the series does ensure a queer reading of these characters and plots. This confirmation eventually comes in the form of loss as Jenna grieves the unexpected death of Shana. She weeps openly and seems inconsolable, and it is only then that the Liars refer to her as “Shana’s girlfriend.” Neither Jenna, nor Shana, are ever referred to as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual” or “queer.”

These subtle revelations that eventually identify certain characters as queer also cast a new light on moments from the past that were likely not read as explicitly queer by most viewers. For example, in “The First Secret,” the season 2 Halloween special, a dance sequence bares the converging queer desires of several characters. At the Halloween party hosted at a classmate’s cabin, Emily enchantingly watches Jenna, the recent arrival to Rosewood. Jenna, dressed as Lady Gaga, looks back and smiles at Emily who is mindlessly swaying with her date Ben. As Giant Drag’s “Cordial Invitation” plays, the two girls make eyes at one another (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: “Gaga’s Queer Gaze.” Emily (left) barely notices her date Ben as she meets the receptive gaze of Jenna (right). I. Marlene King, “The First Secret,” *Pretty Little Liars*, season 2, episode 13, directed by Dana W. Gonzales, aired October 19, 2011

Although the scene’s dominant interpretation is as a sexual awakening for Emily—the protagonist with the classic journey to self-awareness through the coming out story arc—in retrospect, this flashback could also contribute to Jenna’s queer origins. Even as she is portrayed in the past (through the use of the flashback) Jenna appears to accept Emily’s attraction and interest without a hint of discomfort or surprise. She seems to feed off the sexual energy and dance for Emily’s pleasure, performing queer desire. Without the traditional sign posting of queer sexuality, many viewers might have missed Jenna’s mutual attraction to Emily.

Another prominent character’s potential queer origins are revealed in “The First Secret.” Alison introduces herself to Jenna in the costume shop which is coincidentally where Shana works and how she is first introduced on the series. Attempting to establish her dominance as Rosewood’s queen bee, Alison offers Jenna a spot in her posse, while making it clear that a Gaga costume is off-limits since Alison herself was already planning to go as Lady G. Several flashbacks in the first season show how Alison wielded power over Emily, using physical affection to keep her close, but also to leverage the secret of Emily’s queerness to control her. At the Halloween party, seeing the

girl who was infatuated with her pay attention to someone else was too much to bare. From jealousy, possessiveness, or titillation, or a combination of the three, Alison whispers in Emily's ear to confirm once again that she is aware of her queer desire. Alison coos, "were you wishing you could taste her cherry chap stick?" referencing the popular Katy Perry hit of the time (Figure 4). After failing to intimidate the new girl on the cul-de-sac, and being out-done by her Gaga costume, Alison felt particularly threatened by the mounting flirtation between Emily and Jenna. As the series progresses, she explores her feelings for Emily, and in the finale the two end up married, with a baby.



Fig. 4: "Secrets." Alison (left) reminds Emily she owns the secret of her queer sexuality. "The First Secret."

The casual exposure of queer relationships on *Pretty Little Liars* was noted by queer media critic Heather Hogan. Hogan lauded the series' "nonchalance about sexuality" in which "characters can reveal their queerness, suddenly and without explanation, and the audience doesn't even flinch."<sup>5</sup> Hogan is the senior editor of *Autostraddle*, an independently owned online magazine and

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<sup>5</sup> Heather Hogan, "Is *Pretty Little Liars* the best lesbian show ever?" *AfterEllen*, March 28, 2013. <http://www.afterellen.com/tv/106514-is-pretty-little-liars-the-best-lesbian-show-ever>

community for queers and feminists, and the former senior editor of *AfterEllen*, the “Pop Culture Site That Plays For Your Team” (taken from the site’s official page). Inherent in this nonchalance is the expression of sexual fluidity, or an absence of identity categories and labels. Hogan writes, “*Pretty Little Liars* has also done really interesting things with the Kinsey scale...sliding along in various directions, there are characters who seem to be label-free and sexually fluid (or maybe opportunistically queer?) like Alison and Jenna.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the majority of queer women on *Pretty Little Liars* who remain without labels or a coming-out plot, traditional academic sources have ignored these cases, preferring to analyze only the narrative development of Emily Fields and her girlfriend Paige McCullers.

Aside from the casual nature of these revelations, it is also notable that the ever-growing cast of queer characters on the series has a penchant for mischief... and murder. Beyond the lack of traditional signifiers for homosexuality or gender diversity, *Pretty Little Liars* also challenges the gay-positive media narrative of queer teen victims by casting several significant LGBT characters as villains. Both Shana and Jenna were revealed to be working for the notorious “A Team.” Given the history of the criminalization of homosexuality, these representations were met with controversy. Arguably the most controversial of these revelations was the unmasking of A in season 6. Fans learned that series regular CeCe Drake (Vanessa Ray) was born Charles DiLaurentis and assigned male at birth. With her chosen name of Charlotte, the estranged black sheep of the DiLaurentis family began stalking her half-sister Alison and her friends to seek revenge for the way she was mistreated by the DiLaurentis patriarch who sent her away as a child. While creator I. Marlene King defended her decision to make Charlotte, and this iteration of A, a trans woman, many fans could not get over the specter of the trans villain as a perennial televised trope.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Scholars and culture critics often use different standards for evaluating the novelty of a media representation. Presupposing the notion that lesbians are both *underrepresented* and often *misrepresented* in the media, Amanda Carlino defined the norms of representation in her doctoral thesis<sup>7</sup> as representations of teenage lesbians which emphasize isolation, exclusion and rejection. Thus, for Carlino, a subversion of norms on *Pretty Little Liars* emphasized acceptance and happiness as the result of Emily Fields courageously coming-out. Similarly, Caitlin Campisi identified the typical media representation of teenage lesbianism as portraying a phase, or an act of experimentation. Campisi's doctoral dissertation<sup>8</sup> argued that *Pretty Little Liars* presented an innovative media narrative through the stability, or lack of fluidity, of Emily Fields' sexual orientation. This fixed lesbian identity, she argued, subverted the trope of adolescent lesbianism as merely an experimental phase for the male gaze. Carlino and Campisi's standards for what constitutes a subversive representation differ sharply from Heather Hogan's celebration of sexual opportunism, experimentation, and a non-adherence to labels.

The cultural signifiers for LGBT youth may be so rigidly rooted in the tale of the scared teen who performs coming-out as a fixed gay identity, that representations which skip over the coming-out plot, and elude labels, remain unrecognized. Similarly, mainstream discourses of LGBT youth in the social sciences which emphasize the gay teen's vulnerability to bullying, self-harm and suicide, make it feel problematic to embrace representations of queer teen queen bees and especially villains. Deviations from what is considered responsible media representation are often met with skepticism, with critics scouring the series for negative tropes from the past, including homosexual villains, and the legacy of the closet.

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<sup>7</sup> Amanda Carlino, "A Different Sort of Normal: Critical Analysis of Five Lesbian Characters' Coming-out Narratives on Contemporary Television Shows," PhD dissertation, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Campisi, "Homonationalism on TV?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Queer and Trans\* Youth Representations on Mainstream Teen Television Shows."

The standards used to measure the novelty of contemporary media narratives of sexuality are polyvalent, and often take on a different meaning depending on the speaker and the audience. For writing injected with a certain type of activism, the representation of a sexual minority as a villain, bully or queen bee cites an age-old trope while ignoring contemporary understandings of privilege and power. These scholar-activists and journalist-activists position such media narratives in an imagined past, in contrast to their perspective in the present. An interview with Vanessa Ray, the actress who portrayed Charlotte DiLaurentis, exposes the showrunners' perception of being positioned in the future, in sharp contrast to activists' cries of backwards bigotry. When defending the decision to make Charlotte a trans villain, she told *Entertainment Tonight*, "when Marlene had decided this was going to happen and dreamt up this world, she knew what she was taking on and back then, three years ago, we didn't talk about transgender the way that we do now. So it's a really beautiful testament to the fearlessness of Marlene because she definitely was like, I'm going to take on this thing that no one else is taking on, and we're going to talk about it..."<sup>9</sup> Vanessa Ray's portrayal of I. Marlene King as a visionary ahead of her time alludes to the futurity of post-gay storytelling. In response to a firestorm of negative comments on Twitter following the trans villain revelation, I. Marlene King tweeted "We will be equal when we no longer care if a character is LGBT or not when making decisions about them. I'm there now."<sup>10</sup> King's use of the future tense ("we *will* be") coupled with the present tense ("I'm there now") indicates her own belief in making art positioned in a post-gay future. All the series explored in this thesis will touch on this temporal contradiction of past and future and regressive and progressive, culminating in a larger

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<sup>9</sup> Leanne Aguilera, "Pretty Little Liars Boss Explains the Transgender Twist: We Did Not Jump On the Bandwagon," *Entertainment Tonight*, August 12, 2015. [https://www.etonline.com/news/169830\\_pretty\\_little\\_liars\\_boss\\_marlene\\_king\\_explains\\_the\\_transgender\\_twist\\_we\\_did\\_not\\_jump\\_on\\_the\\_bandwagon](https://www.etonline.com/news/169830_pretty_little_liars_boss_marlene_king_explains_the_transgender_twist_we_did_not_jump_on_the_bandwagon)

<sup>10</sup> I. Marlene King, Twitter Post, August 6, 2016, 6:50 PM. <https://twitter.com/imarleneking/status/762103466172887041?lang=en>



interrogation of gay-positive media in contrast to a burgeoning post-gay genre.

The aspect of temporality, or references to past, present and future, can be better understood through the political history of the gay question. More specifically, the lack of consensus over what constitutes the norms of representation can be illuminated by the contested and competing frameworks of gay pride and gay shame. The phrase “coming-out of the closet” is often associated with the subsequent phase of being “out and proud.” Gay Pride is often understood as a political reaction to the centuries of silence in the “closet,” emphasizing both pride and visibility. Pride has thus occupied a place in the present as the antidote to the past. Heather Love, one of the most well-known scholars associated with the concept of gay shame, rails against scholarship that is ideologically infected with the contemporary politics of gay pride.

Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* closely examines the temporal relationships in queer historiography between the researcher and the subject, the living and the dead, and the imagined past and the present. The first consideration posited by Love involves the pitfalls of “gay pride” politics. Love argues that historical scholarship is not immune to trends in contemporary cultural discourse which define gays and lesbians in positive terms, emphasizing themes of resilience, tolerance and pride. Consequentially, academics will anachronistically apply contemporary definitions of sexual orientation and queer community to historical subjects, thereby redeeming the bigotry of the past with the politics of the present. Offering a Foucauldian analysis of the tactical polyvalence of discourse, Love explains that the “characteristic forms of gay freedom are produced in response to this history [of stigma].... Pride and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet; they are made in the image of specific forms of denigration.”<sup>11</sup> This means that the very standards used to evaluate the gay

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<sup>11</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

question, namely pride and visibility, are not necessarily progressive in and of themselves, but rather a directly proportional response to the standards of the imagined past. She further argues that the revisionist gay-positive narrative emphasizes community and pride as a way to rescue subjects from the past, and to fortify the political status of queer people in the present.

Textual analysis, in this case of televised narratives, of allegedly queer themes or characters is also intimately tied to the political demands of the present. If the political response in the present is often merely the polar opposite of the past, will the pendulum of media representation sway once again, this time away from themes of courage, visibility, stability, and subjectivity as a minority resisting a hostile majority? What will this new iteration of storytelling look like? Without the traditional signifiers of the gay experience, how will viewers identify these narratives as expressly queer, and what will this shift reveal about the future of queer identity? As the next two case studies will demonstrate, the terrain of what constitutes novel, authentic narratives of queer adolescence is often contested by fans, networks, and scholars of queer studies and media studies. The following chapter on *MTV's Faking It* will reveal a subversion of the coming-out narrative, and a satire of identity politics. Like *Pretty Little Liars*, *Faking It* experiments with the possibility of queer queen bees and badass bullies, while interrogating the liberal conception of minorities and diversity. This close reading will shed light on *Faking It's* unique contributions to queer adolescent programming, as well as the ways in which the series was inspired by its predecessor *Pretty Little Liars*.

## Chapter 2: “If we’re faking it, would I do this?”: Queer Performance and Identity on MTV’s *Faking It*

A boisterous house party is interrupted by the host as he leaps onto a table to deliver his bold announcement. As tipsy teens settle down and look up at their ring leader, he begins to preach from the elevated pulpit, “May I have your attention? Two friends of ours are scared tonight. They’re hiding in this teeny, tiny, dark, little closet, afraid to come out, afraid we’ll reject them.” The crowd erupts in “boos” and gasps. Ringing his hands in the air, he promises, “Here at Hester High, we do things differently.... But, how do we prove to them that we’re not your typical high school?” The handsome host’s impish eyes twinkle at his brilliant idea, “Let’s elect them homecoming queens!” The crowd cheers wildly and chants, “All Hail the Queens!” In this moment, bemused best friends transcend freshman anonymity and ascend rapidly to popularity, becoming the most beloved couple at Hester High.

This momentous crescendo is nothing more than a comedy of errors with introverted Amy Raudenfeld (Rita Volk) and her ambitious bestie Karma Ashcroft (Katie Stevens) mistaken for a lesbian couple. Instead of recoiling in shame, or correcting their mistaken peers, Karma and Amy accept the nomination. Just before the scheduled speech, their precarious plan is threatened by Amy’s step-sister who warns the audience that their duplicitous queens are merely faking it. The friends risk being outed as straight—as pretend lesbians—until Amy moves closer to Karma and passionately kisses her, asking the crowd, “If we’re faking it, would I do this?” Confetti rains down on the lip locked-liars as the masses cheer them on (Figure 5).

As the name implies, MTV’s *Faking It* explores the messy lives of teenagers who fake a queer relationship for social capital. However, in this comedy of errors, the lad(ies) doth protest too much, and no one can tell what is truly a performance, or what real feelings lie within. Amy’s facial expression following her bold move to kiss her friend in front of the student body instantly

betrays her inner feelings. This pivotal moment in the series' pilot hints that the kiss was more than just a performance, and questions who will really be faking it on *Faking It*.



Fig. 5: “Kiss and Don’t Tell.” With the home coming vote in peril, Amy kisses her best friend Karma to prove the couple is not faking their relationship.

Carter Covington, “Pilot,” *Faking It*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Jamie Travis, aired April 22, 2014.

Unless otherwise specified, all screen grabs were captured by the author from *Faking It* on Amazon Prime Video.

Launched in 2014, *Faking It* is a romantic comedy foregrounded in an extremely progressive school in the suburbs of Austin, Texas, where diversity is a prerequisite to popularity. *Faking It* was the first series to feature a main character who was intersex—played by an intersex actor—just one queer character among a sea of lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, trans and questioning youth. Indeed, all the letters in the acronym make an appearance on the show! The series primarily focuses on the relationship between best friends, Karma and Amy, who *pretend* to be lesbians to gain popularity at school, until the *performance* becomes *reality* and one of the girls confesses her true feelings.

As was the case for *Pretty Little Liars*, *Faking It* demonstrates a shift from the margin to the center with regard to queer themes and characters. Among the main ensemble, there are several gay

characters, one of whom is trans (FTM), an intersex queen bee, and protagonist Amy who fluctuates between identifying as a lesbian, as bisexual, and most often as questioning or non-labeling. This chapter will explore *Faking It*'s unique contribution to queer teen programming through a reversal of the coming-out narrative, and an exploration of the blurred lines between performance and identity. Unlike *Pretty Little Liars*, *Faking It* was branded specifically as an LGBT comedy and was canceled after only three short seasons. This chapter will investigate how *Faking It* represented queer adolescent sexuality, and how critical reception among queer fans may have led to its premature demise.

*Faking It*'s contribution to queer adolescent programming is illuminated through a juxtaposition with the traditional coming-out narrative described by Esther Saxey in her 2008 book *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. Saxey, an Academic Developer at the London School of Economics and Political Science, has published several works on the intersection of narrative and gender and sexuality. Having earned her doctorate in English, most of her scholarship focuses on nineteenth and twentieth century literature. Describing the coming-out genre as being "as simple as a romance or a detective story" for its universal narrative arc, Saxey provides readers with a basic blueprint of an "individual's path to lesbian, gay or bisexual identity" according to the ever expanding LGBTQ literary genre.<sup>12</sup>

To write *Homoplot*, Saxey read "over three hundred coming out novels, autobiographies and anthology contributions" which span the '70s, '80s, '90s and early 2000s.<sup>13</sup> In her comprehensive analysis of several representative texts, the coming out tale often depicts scared, isolated teenagers who are "usually assumed to be heterosexual, unless and until they discover

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<sup>12</sup> Esther Saxey, "Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity." *Gender, Sexuality & Culture*, v. 7. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008): 2; 1.

<sup>13</sup> Saxey, 9.

otherwise for themselves, and communicate it to those around them.”<sup>14</sup> This trajectory is deemed universal for all sexual minorities, making it “logical that every self-identified lesbian, gay man, or bisexual should have a coming out story, a tale summing up their own journey to sexual identity and showing how their nature made itself known to them despite a hostile environment.”<sup>15</sup>

As this chapter will show, *Faking It* challenges three aspects of Saxey’s traditional homoplot: the assumption of heterosexuality, the hostile environment, and the communication of sexual identity as emerging from within and being declared to an external public. *Faking It* does this through the premise of two friends who are assumed to be gay, celebrated and made homecoming queens by their adoring school community, and who ultimately must undergo a second, private, internal coming-out process to discover a sexual identity that is anything but fixed. The fourth and final deviation from Saxey’s description of the traditional homoplot is the romantic comedy’s representation of sexual fluidity, and critique of labels. Similar to Freeform’s *Pretty Little Liars*, *Faking It* rejects ontologized gay identity with characters who elude traditional labels. As Saxey describes, “Coming out stories often have their roots firmly in identity politics: they argue for a stable and recognizable gay or lesbian identity, they describe the oppression of this identity within society, and they celebrate its liberation.”<sup>16</sup> *Faking It*, on the other hand, presents a wide variety of sexual expressions, and challenges the liberatory politics of progressive communities that pressure their members to come out as a specific, easily understood sexual identity. A close viewing of “Untitled,” a cleverly named episode about the constraints of categories and identity politics, will expound upon this final deviation from the traditional coming-out narrative.

The first section of this chapter will explore how *Faking It* plays with the assumptions of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

the coming-out teen genre as defined by Saxey's monograph. This section will begin with the way *Faking It* deviates from the assumption of heterosexuality and the hostile homophobic environment, and conclude with the series' reversal of the chronology and causality of the coming-out narrative. The second section will illustrate *Faking It*'s internal critique of identity politics and labels through the close viewing described above, in which winter break is held hostage unless the students at Hester wear their identity labels loudly and proudly. The third section will also use the episode "Untitled" to examine the series' message about adolescence and the blurred lines between friendship and romance, as well as performance and identity. The fourth section will consider the genre of "Post-Gay" television and audience reception among queer fans. The final section will conclude with reflections on *Faking It*'s representation of queer adolescent sexualities, and future iterations of this close examination of the series.

### **"Being gay is the best thing that's ever happened to us": Rewriting the coming-out genre**

Hester High School is anything but typical, and in Austin, as we all know, they keep it "weird." The unique culture of Austin is captured by the contrast between the local students and Lauren (Bailey De Young), Amy's stepsister, the token conservative mean girl from Dallas. Lauren, who was forced to move to the ultra-liberal enclave when her father fell in love with a weather girl on Christian Mingle, describes Hester as a "Kumbaya, socialist freakshow of a high school."<sup>17</sup> Understanding the social dynamics of this milieu is essential to comprehending how and why Karma and Amy were presumed to be a queer couple. While Saxey points out that children and adolescents in the U.S. and the UK are typically assumed to be straight unless and until they communicate anything to the contrary, at Hester, the student body was eager to have a lesbian

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<sup>17</sup> All quotations from the series were transcribed by the author. All citations in this section, unless specified otherwise, come from the series' pilot. Carter Covington, "Pilot," *Faking It*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Jamie Travis, aired April 22, 2014

couple and immediately embraced Karma and Amy as queer.

Hester presents as a super liberal bubble in which being any kind of minority makes you popular. In her article “The Best Lesbian Show Ever!: The Contemporary Evolution of Teen Coming-Out Narratives,” Jennifer Mitchell describes Hester as “the epitome of a dream high school where traditional, stereotypical popular teenagers—jocks, cheerleaders, beauty queens—are trumped in the social hierarchy by artists, activists, and expressly queer students.”<sup>18</sup> The burden of proof placed on coming-out as straight makes Hester somewhat of a queer utopia. In the context of a romantic comedy, this playful subversion of norms allows the sexual confusion to be at the heart of the humor.

The scene which sets the stage for the mistake further reveals the politics of Hester’s student body, and *Faking It* as a progressive series. Annoyed that her new step-sister is sitting on a bench, blocking her access to the sun, Lauren tells Amy and Karma, “you’ve got five seconds to hop in your canoe and paddle back to the island of lesbos, so I can get my Vitamin D.” Such harsh words are immediately met with ridicule by popular boys Shane Harvey (Michael Willett), the host of the party, and Liam Booker (Gregg Sulkin), Shane’s straight wingman. Shane is immediately established as the gay ringleader of Hester whose best friend Liam is the resident brooding artist heartthrob. To establish the timeliness of the show, as well as the unique culture at Hester, Shane quips, “Bullying the gays. Someone reeks of the late '90s.” Liam makes Lauren’s homophobic comment sound even more bizarre, speculating that she must be doing “some sort of performance art piece.” Acknowledging that such a queer friendly culture is not merely a sign of the times, but rather a description of this specific school, and this specific city, Lauren grunts, “Fucking Austin. Anyplace else in Texas and I would own you bitches” as she storms off.

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<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Mitchell, “The Best Lesbian Show Ever!: The Contemporary Evolution of Teen Coming-Out Narratives,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 464.



Karma longs to break into Hester's social scene, but how do you make it in a school where cheerleaders and jocks don't cut it? Having witnessed Lauren's old school bullying, Shane and Liam assume that Karma and Amy are a lesbian couple and immediately invite them to the hottest back-to-school party. While Karma is thrilled to be invited to the social event of the season and shamelessly flirts with Liam, Amy, preferring to binge *House Hunters* on Netflix, slumps over on a couch. Shane's subsequent interaction with Amy further situates the romantic comedy in a queer utopia. He cozies up to her, admitting he really wants to be friends, and he's been "craving lesbian energy" in his life. When Amy, surprised, says she is flattered but *not* gay, Shane assumes she must be stuck in the closet. He cannot fathom that she would actually be straight. Shane tuts, "I was you once, so terrified of rejection, it took me forever to come out. But once I did, fourth grade got so much better."

Shane's speech is a humorous rehashing of "it gets better" from Dan Savage's Youtube campaign about how life will get better for LGBT kids and teenagers if they stick it out. In this iteration of it gets better, the declaration, or coming-out, occurs as early as fourth grade. *Faking It* reminds us in 2014 that the traditional signifier of the gay experience, coming-out of the closet, is a disclosure that is happening earlier and earlier in youth. This is an indication to viewers of MTV's social awareness which acknowledges larger shifts in mainstream culture, and which further bolsters an understanding of Austin, and Hester High, as progressive bubbles and queer utopias. The mere fact of struggling to come out, or being closeted, is rendered so passé, just as bullying the gays was "so 90s." Far from the hostile environment which, according to Saxey, sets the backdrop for the traditional coming-out narrative, Hester High's desire for diversity, however forced or fake, makes it more beneficial to be queer than to be a homophobe. It is this very gay-positive environment which erodes the assumption of heterosexuality, and instead puts the onus on coming-out as straight.

As a shy, sincere tomboy, Amy wants to immediately rectify the situation and clear up the misunderstanding over their relationship. However, Karma convinces her, squealing “Being gay is the best thing that’s ever happened to us.” Eager to please her best friend, Amy agrees to go along with the ruse. Recognition as a queer couple earns the girls immense social capital, including photoshoots, interviews with the student newspaper, baked goods, invitations to exclusive lunch tables, and of course, the coveted spots on Homecoming Court. For Karma, this social capital centers on impressing Liam Booker who is aroused by the challenge of seducing a “real lesbian.” For Amy, the increased attention from her peers, and loss of time with her best friend, merely makes her more anxious about the performance.

Amy’s reluctance only grows as she discovers her complicated feelings for Karma, ranging from adoration and protectiveness to physical attraction, jealousy, and occasionally possessiveness. This private, internal discovery is what scholars, and viewers, traditionally envision as the origin of the coming-out process. The process begins with a queer feeling, followed by self-discovery which eventually culminates in the declarative process of coming out as a sexual minority to the heterosexual majority. In this way, *Faking It* challenges both the chronology and causality of coming-out stories through a couple that is mistakenly presumed to be lesbian by a progressive high school, contemplates coming-out as straight, and eventually discovers queer feelings only after *faking* their same-sex relationship. As Saxey argues, the assumption of heterosexuality shapes the practice of coming-out. Traditionally, the story goes as follows: “sexual identities come first (both chronologically and causally)…” followed by the exposure of an individual as “gay” or “lesbian.”<sup>19</sup> In coming-out stories, “the influence is all in one direction, flowing from identities to texts, from the inner self to the outer depiction of that self.”<sup>20</sup> The texts referenced by Saxey are

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<sup>19</sup> Saxey, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

akin to the televised narratives depicting the coming-out story arc in which viewers assume a queer feeling or identity precedes the declaration of sexual orientation to other characters.

With Saxey's description in mind, Jennifer Mitchell points out that while typical narratives place the burden of proof on coming-out as queer, since teens are assumed to be straight by default, "*Faking It* posits an entirely alternative trajectory with Amy and Karma presumed queer until they are willing and/or able to explain otherwise."<sup>21</sup> Mitchell and others have commented on the nuanced representation of coming-out as a continuous process without a natural end. This process involves a spectrum of public audiences of varying sizes, from an auditorium of cheering teens, to late night confessions to your best friend. Mitchell applies Saxey's other central tenant, that the coming-out plot *creates* the identity it purports to *describe*, when reflecting that "Amy first considers her sexuality after a particular version of it has been made public."<sup>22</sup> In other words, Amy did not identify a queer feeling before performing lesbian desire for her peers, and only considered the possibility of being a lesbian after her peers assumed it was so.

Rebecca Nicholson, who praises the series, also picks up on *Faking It*'s representation of a complex coming-out process. She qualifies her praise, acknowledging that the premise of a show about girls pretending to be lesbians "smacked of Katy Perry opportunism" but has "become, somehow, a sensitive, sweet and funny look at teenage life that handles confusing sexuality with surprising dexterity."<sup>23</sup> Nicholson further emphasizes the private or internal coming-out process which is not always the same as, or not always a precedent to the public coming out. Nicholson notices how "Amy is out and proud, officially, albeit disingenuously, which should make her real coming out journey... easier. In her everyday life, her (fake) relationship is not only accepted by her

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<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, 465.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 466.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Nicholson, "MTV's *Faking It*: A Surprisingly Sophisticated Teen Comedy," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2014/may/14/mtv-faking-it-couple-smart-teen-comedy>

peers, it's made her a hero to them.”<sup>24</sup> Despite this utopian setting, “Amy is floundering, and this is where *Faking It* shows its sophistication. It implies that there is another coming out to do, a much harder one, in that Amy must face being honest with herself.”<sup>25</sup> The difficulty of this more intimate coming out is amplified by social pressures in Amy’s conservative family.

Despite the support, or hero worship, of her peers, Amy’s experience as a queer teenager is still colored by some of the traditional angst and struggle. Such a plot may seem out of place in the series’ universe of queer utopia at Hester High. This internal contradiction is significant as the series seems torn between writing for an audience of progressive insiders who believe their communities are evolving to become “post-gay,” and the political and economic realities for many queer teens and adults for whom it *doesn't* “get better.”

We are given clues about family conflict from the pilot when we are introduced to Amy’s southern bell mother, who seems more like a debutant than a meteorologist. Before Amy is able to come out privately to her family, her mother, Farrah (Rebecca McFarland) is hired to cover the story of the season, the first same-gender Homecoming couple to be crowned in Texas!<sup>26</sup> To her shock, the queer queens are Karma and her daughter Amy (Figure 6). Of course, all of this happens before Amy even considers the possibility that she is not straight, meaning that she experiences maternal conflict over sexual orientation before feeling or naming a sexual identity. This moment provides yet another challenge to the chronology of the coming-out narrative. The reversal of events also helps satirize the traditional tale of familial rejection by revealing that this maternal meltdown over her teenager’s “sexual orientation” is indeed much ado about nothing, at least for the moment.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Carter Covington, “Homecoming Out,” *Faking It*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Jamie Travis, aired April 29, 2014



Fig. 6: “Homecoming Queens.” Farrah (bottom) is shocked to see her own daughter is one of Texas’s first homecoming queens (top). Carter Covington, “Homecoming Out,” *Faking It*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Jamie Travis, aired April 29, 2014.  
Top photo taken from: <https://versusthefans.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/faking-it-nice-pic.jpg>  
Bottom photo taken from: [http://faking-it.wikia.com/wiki/Farrah\\_Cooper](http://faking-it.wikia.com/wiki/Farrah_Cooper)

Furthermore, this misplaced narrative about mother-daughter conflict over lesbianism may question the merits of pre-emptively positioning queer youth in a context of pathology, hurt and rejection. Jack Halberstam specifically addresses the limits of initiating young people into a larger queer community through the lens of protection and harm reduction. He explains that youth groups, which “have sprung up everywhere along with gay-straight encounter groups in high schools” aim to “rescue young queers from the potential bullying and isolation that awaits the adolescent with same-sex desires or alternative gendering.... Unfortunately, some youth groups also install,

perhaps prematurely, both a sense of a fixed identity and a context of hurt and damage within which to understand that fixed sexual identity.”<sup>27</sup> As Halberstam explains, this status of victimhood, in turn, is tied to the narrative of a fixed identity as a sexual minority. Revealing that Amy is initiated as a queer subject first by her diversity obsessed school, and then by her homophobic mother, before actually experiencing queer desire, offers a perfect satire of the limits described by Halberstam.

While Amy receives great external support from the school community, and Karma’s hippie parents who are overjoyed that their daughter is a “lesbian,” she lacks support from her family and her best friend. The latter is the most surprising and disappointing, particularly as Karma, who orchestrated the prolonged performance, tells Amy not to worry, that she’s “just confused,” as if parroting the advice given to generations of queer adolescents. Amy denies any confusion or ambiguity, and suggests that Karma feels the same when they kiss, saying, “there’s a spark between us, you can’t deny it...”<sup>28</sup> Here the series plays with viewers’ conservative expectations that queer behaviors must be a symptom of an underlying queer identity. Amy assumes that Karma’s reluctance stems from fear and shame, revealing the true performance to be one of faking the *pretend* aspect of their relationship, as opposed to the clearly manufactured out and proud queer one. As a final appeal to Karma to push through any fear, Amy persuades, “Everyone already thinks we’re lesbians... let’s give the people what they want.” Amy assumes that Karma is similarly struggling with an internal coming out, despite the ease of their public lesbian identities, until Karma cracks and admits that she’s been sleeping with Liam. Amy then realizes she is alone in her feelings, while fans remain skeptical of Karma’s perfect zero on the Kinsey Scale.

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Halberstam, "Shame and White Gay Masculinity," *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 222.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

## **“Just pick bisexual so we can have Christmas!”: Pressures of Progressive Communities**

As explained in the Introduction, *Faking It* deviates not merely from *how* coming out is traditionally performed, but also in *what* the characters come out as. Instead of merely reinforcing the categories of “lesbian” or “straight,” or even “bisexual,” *Faking It* challenges the value placed on labels in progressive communities. In addition to Saxey’s *Homoplot*, *Faking It*’s contribution to queer adolescent programming is illuminated further through Jason Jacobs’s “On Glee, Queer Kids, and the Limits of Family,” an article about the construction and maintenance of an ontologized gay identity in Fox’s musical-comedy drama. Jacobs applies a Foucauldian analysis to the construction of gay identity in the popular teen series. He argues that *Glee*, as a gay-positive series, demands that its young queer protagonists come-out as “gay” or “bisexual” or “lesbian” to their mostly heterosexual peers in the glee club.”<sup>29</sup> Jacobs even titles one of his subheadings “Come Out with Your Hands Up” to capture the pressures and expectations placed on queer adolescents to perform coming-out, a forced declarative process mandated for their own good.<sup>30</sup>

Jacobs refers to the labeling of sexual orientation through the coming-out ritual as the adoption of an ontologized gay identity: “an identity that aligns personal, idiosyncratic desires and behaviors with the available forms of social validation.”<sup>31</sup> When analyzing one of the show’s coming-out narratives in which the protagonist must “perform coming out,” justifying her decision by explaining, “I want you to know me, who I really am,” Jacobs describes the scene as “a dominant construction of queer identity as an ontological, internal truth that must be confessed à la Foucault.”<sup>32</sup> This neatly packaged gay identity emphasizes the process of coming-out as emerging

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<sup>29</sup> Jason Jacobs, “Raising Gays: On *Glee*, Queer Kids, and the Limits of the Family,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 324.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 336.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

from the shadows of a hidden life, and revealing one’s true self. It simultaneously reinforces the homosexual/heterosexual binary, as well as the stability of identity categories.

In *Faking It*’s “Untitled,” the eighth episode of season 3, Penelope, the tree hugging principal of Hester decides to cancel Christmas break as she believes it is offensive. As she whisks through the halls tearing down wreaths and candy canes, Lauren gasps, “Did you declare war on Christmas like Starbucks?”<sup>33</sup> Instead of merely calling the vacation “winter break,” Penelope decides to do away with the days off, lamenting that “in an ideal world, everyone would just wear labels that told us exactly how not to offend them, but they don’t.” Lauren, desperate to evade the “PC police” and to keep up her decorations, slyly asks, “but what if they did?” as her face curls into the Grinch’s iconic smile. The solution is a mandatory sensitivity census known as The Identity Booth, a veiled box where students are directed to “pick the labels that best represent who you are.” Students walk into the booth and exit littered with labels pinned to their shirts making explicit their gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and peer group (“artist,” “musician,” “jock” etc.) (Figure 7).



Fig. 7: “Sensitivity Census Identity Booth.” Principal Penelope and Lauren make a video presenting the Sensitivity Census Identity Booth. All images in this section come from “Untitled.”

<sup>33</sup> All quotations in this section are taken from Dan Steele, “Untitled,” *Faking It*, season 3, episode 8, directed by Jeff Melman, aired May 3, 2016



Per Jacobs' definition of ontologized gay identity as the belief that coming-out unmask an inner truth, Hester's Identity Booth confers the notion that labels capture the real self. The remainder of the episode simultaneously celebrates the diversity of the student body at Hester, while poking fun at the compulsion to label. This duality reveals yet again the contradictory nature of *Faking It* as a show which hoped to gain social capital by representing every letter in the LGBTQIA acronym, but simultaneously critiques the demarcations of labels. Participation in the sensitivity census heats up as Brad, a mild mannered punk with piercings and a leather jacket, emerges from the booth with an "asexual" pin as Penelope and the students cheer. Penelope exclaims "we have an asexual!" Later on, Brad shouts "I'm asexual" into the crowd to reiterate the fact, and perhaps remind viewers that technically the series has now accounted for every letter in the LGBTQIA acronym. This celebration of ticking off all the identity category boxes coincides with the episode's final critique of labels.

The limitations of all labels is best communicated by Amy who, up until now, has refused to "pick a side." Realizing that she is, in Penelope's words, "the last piece of the sensitivity puzzle," Amy is pressured by the cafeteria masses chanting "Label! Label!" In the best line of the entire season, Lauren, frustrated with her waffling step-sister, whines, "it's not rocket science, you like guys, you like girls, just pick bisexual so we can have Christmas!" Amy reluctantly marches into the booth only to pull back the curtain and reveal her chest covered in every possible label (Figure 8). As the mouthpiece for the series, she explains, "did you think these labels would help you understand me better? ... I barely understand myself... I'm a walking pile of contradictions, we all are, and none of *this* equals us... And no one should be pressured to slap on a label so that someone else can define them." Amy's sermon is met with cheering from her peers—these kids just love to clap—and the school is free to have their winter break, and liberated from The Identity Booth.



Fig. 8: “No Labels.” Amy reveals the absurdity of the Identity Booth by selecting every label in the machine.

*Faking It*'s social commentary reads like a low-brow Foucauldian critique of queer community and identity politics. Foucault highlights some of the ways in which political gay community actually restricts individual freedom and gay liberation by forcing members to come-out, and upholding the gay/straight binary, as well as further stigmatizing bisexuality and other non-normative sexualities. In this way, *Faking It* mocks the culture at Hester High, and urges us to question the value placed on identity politics in the context of experimental adolescence.

**“Can we still have sleepovers?” Adolescence, Same-sex friendships and Intimacy**

A close viewing of “Untitled” also underscores the series’ treatment of adolescence and same-sex friendships as they constitute a form of queer intimacy that is not always easy to distinguish from traditional platonic relationships between teenage girls. Following Amy’s confession of having feelings for Karma, the friends are compelled to renegotiate boundaries. Suddenly changing out of tank tops together, and sharing a bed seems complicated. When trying to

have a “normal” sleepover, Karma starts reading a *Cosmo* quiz until she gets to “do you secretly have a crush on your BFF?”<sup>34</sup> These tensions come to a head in “Untitled” as Karma struggles with her possessive hold on Amy, and feelings of jealousy as she risks losing her best friend to another girl.

The episode opens with Amy’s dream in which Karma comes to her door to confess her true feelings. Reflecting on her agitation at seeing Amy get so close with their old summer camp friend Sabrina, Karma reveals, “it drove me a little crazy, and I think I finally realize why.”<sup>35</sup> Amy begrudgingly pulls back, sighing, “I cannot go back there with you,” but as Karma’s face transforms into Sabrina, the mouth coos “maybe you can go there with me” (Figure 9).



Fig. 9: “The Dream.” Amy kisses Karma in her dream as she transforms into Sabrina. All images in this section come from “Untitled.”

Amy wakes up in a sweat as she imagines Karma’s true, latent feelings, and her own creeping attraction for Sabrina. When going to Shane for counsel, Amy describes Sabrina as

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<sup>34</sup> Megan Hearne, “You Can’t Handle the Truth or Dare,” *Faking It*, season 2, episode 2, directed by Claire Scanlon, aired September 30, 2014

<sup>35</sup> All quotations in this section are taken from Dan Steele, “Untitled,” *Faking It*, season 3, episode 8, directed by Jeff Melman, aired May 3, 2016

“another friend who’s probably just gonna turn out to be straight.” Karma immediately suspects Amy is keeping secrets when she eyes her “crush boots” and immediately deduces that Amy must be vying for Sabrina’s attention.

Many critics have noted the complicated nature of Karma’s feelings for Amy, and how their ambiguously queer relationship contributes to the series’ overall message about adolescent sexuality and friendship. Rebecca Nicholson praises the series for this nuanced representation of an evolving friendship. She writes, *Faking It* “manages to show flashes of genuine emotion – a brief kiss that meant nothing to Karma, but meant everything to Amy; how tactile behaviour between friends must now be redefined; whether there is a need for labels if it is just one person on the receiving end of this strange new affection.”<sup>36</sup>

Jennifer Mitchell describes how Karma’s performance as a bi-curious, femme lesbian elicits interest from teen heartthrob Liam Booker, but “Amy, on the other hand, suddenly realizes that she is likely queer, although the show shies away from identifying her specifically as lesbian, and definitely in love with her best friend. The performance, for Amy, becomes simultaneously real and impossible.”<sup>37</sup> For many fans, Karma’s performance of heterosexuality may seem disingenuous as she kisses Amy, arranges a three-some (with Liam) and pines after her every time she is consumed by someone else.

The show’s queering of adolescent friendship extends to a larger critique of the binary between behavior and identity, or performing versus being. *Faking It* queers the trope of fake lesbians, or girls performing queer desire for male attention, because some feelings are revealed to be genuine, if not always shared equally by both parties. This may ring true for many who, in high school, believed their experiences with queer intimacy was “just for practice,” just a one time

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<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Nicholson, “MTV’s *Faking It*: A Surprisingly Sophisticated Teen Comedy.”

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell, 466.

thing, or just an intense friendship that included sexual exploration. Some of these viewers may have grown up to recognize these experiences as the origin of a sexual orientation, and some will never ascribe such meaning to their past or even present relationships with girls or women.

The episode ends with more indications that friendship is not so far from romantic relationships. Alarmed at Amy's evolving relationship with Sabrina, Karma urges Felix, a boy whom Amy likes but cannot date until he finishes a twelve-step program, to make something happen. Felix shyly replies that he's "not so good at the woo," but Karma confidently assures him that she's great at it. Karma devises a plot for Felix to grab Amy's attention and he begrudgingly acquiesces. He stands under Amy's window, pretending to strum a guitar, while Karma stands behind an oak tree playing all the right notes (Figure 10).



Fig. 10: "The Woo." Karma hides behind a tree playing "Auld Lang Syne" as Felix mimes the chords, and sings lyrics about making his first date with Amy on New Year's Eve official.

As Felix sings, Amy's mom, overjoyed to see her daughter's opposite gender romantic interest, sadly informs him that the wayward teen is out at some bingo night with Sabrina. Karma feels betrayed and devastated, so she sits in the dark, waiting for Amy to return from her date. Karma interrogates Amy about how she's "fallen for a straight friend before," but Amy is having none of it! As she pivots away, she says, "Thanks for the warning, officer, but you don't have to police my feelings, especially when they're not about you."

The policing of feelings relates directly to the show's message about the policing of identity categories through the coming-out process and reliance on labels. Even the label "friend" has been used historically to delineate a form of attachment that may not cross over into erotic or romantic attachment, but has been queered by scholars to reveal the fragility of such a binary. Ultimately "Untitled" satirizes the limitations of progressive communities that actually pressure people to identity themselves and perform coming-out constantly. The episode simultaneously questions the very meaning of labels through two allegedly straight characters, Karma and Sabrina, who fight over Amy. A close viewing of the episode shows how the series rejects many aspects of the traditional coming-out narrative, including the binaries between gay and straight, lovers and friends, and innate versus learned. The latter critique of ontologized identity, with biological origins, suggests that the premise of performing queerness has potential for understanding the fluidity of experience and the heterogeneity of relationships. The series' messaging about the elusive nature of identity, and the truth of performances ultimately help us understand how *Faking It* wanted to start an era of "post-gay" television which will be explored further in the following section.

## Queer Fan Reception of “Post-Gay” Television

*Faking It* presents a rejection of the ontologized gay identity through the representation of sexual fluidity and satirization of identity labels, as well as the inversion of the coming-out narrative. It is important to note, as Jacobs has, that *Glee* launched in the golden age of “gay-positive media.” The first season of these slushy-stained musical misfits graced Fox from May of 2009 to June of 2010, just three months before the launch of Dan Savage’s It Gets Better Campaign. As described in the previous chapter, there was a trend in television to portray brave coming-out stories of teenagers who resisted in the face of bullying. *Faking It* represents a more contemporary generation of queer adolescent programming which behaves as if it were less morally obligated to adhere to certain narrative arcs or espouse any particular politics, in other words, a “post-gay” narrative.

*Faking It*’s executive producer Carter Covington told The Hollywood Reporter he hopes *Faking It* “will be the first show that started...the post-gay era on television... (with) storytelling as coming from a place beyond coming out stories and really exploring the lives of all of our characters, regardless of their sexuality.”<sup>38</sup> It is significant that Covington actually uses the term “post-gay,” and that he defines the genre as one that moves beyond the coming-out narrative, and treats all characters equally, untethered to what Ellis Hanson called the “moralistic politics of representation.”<sup>39</sup>

The show is able to do this because it gives off the appearance of a large LGBTQIA population of characters. The social desirability of queerness, and the popularity and prominence of Shane Harvey as the gay ring leader, function to make Hester High seem “Post-Gay.” To offer a

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<sup>38</sup> Lesley Goldberg, “Carter Covington Explains Why MTV Is Ending 'Faking It' With Season 3 (Exclusive),” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 13, 2016. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/faking-canceled-carter-covington-interview-892656>

<sup>39</sup> Ellis Hanson, “Introduction: Out Takes,” In *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, by Ellis Hanson (Ed.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999): 5.

brief introduction to the rhetoric of “post-gay,” Liora P. Elias, in her doctoral dissertation, argues that with post-gay television, “Viewers are left with the suggestion that the struggles of homophobia... violence against gay individuals and... family alienation due to non-acceptance of one’s sexuality are issues no longer experienced by ‘modern’ gay folks....”<sup>40</sup> The idyllic utopian setting of *Hester High* functions as a post-gay space in which queer characters are fully integrated into the social scene, and even dominate it.

This rhetoric of having overcome homophobia means that for many “post-gay” often translates to “post-discrimination.” Amin Ghaziani cites the emergence of the term in America in an article written for the *New York Times Magazine*, which cites James Collard, then *Out Magazine*’s editor and chief, as saying, “we should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn’t ‘un-gay.’ It’s about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle....”<sup>41</sup> In the context of media representation, this can emerge through LGBTQIA characters who do not identify with a larger queer community or collective history, and who do not prioritize the politics of Stonewall.

This belief in having arrived at an era of “post-gay” narratives implies that the series feels free to play with controversial tropes like fake lesbians, and homophobic villains who are merely closeted members of the LGBTQIA community. The latter is reminiscent of post-gay programming on *Pretty Little Liars*. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Pretty Little Liars* featured several queer and trans villains who were part of the notorious A team. The series also included queer protagonists who were simultaneously victimized for their sexuality while perpetrating homophobic bullying against other LGBT characters, including mysterious femme fatal and

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<sup>40</sup> Liora P. Elias, “Post-Gay Television: ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’ Marriage, and Bullying On and Off Screen,” PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2015, 105.

<sup>41</sup> “Sexual Politics; New Way of Being,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 21, 1998. Quoted in Amin Ghaziani, “Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction,” *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (2011): 99.



protagonist Alison Dilaurentis who bullied Emily Fields and Paige McCullers for their queer desires. Even Emily's first serious girlfriend, Paige, the daughter of a local deacon, was initially presented as an aggressive homophobic bully who attempted to drown Emily in the Rosewood Highschool swimming pool. The presence of these characters locates homophobia on the show as something perpetrated by closeted or maladjusted queer characters, in sharp contrast to those like Emily Fields who perform coming out for the straight majority and present as an easily definable gay identity. This treatment of homophobia bolsters the post-gay rhetoric of the series.

In an essay published in 2004, David Bergman voices his early critiques of gay-positive media as presenting story arcs in which homophobia existed only in the minds of the queer characters, and spread only by closeted characters struggling with their sexuality. Bergman describes the "fantasy of a world of acceptance, where homophobia is a thing of the past" as the setting in which only paranoid gay people acutely perceive a power differential.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, On *Faking It*, Lauren, the conservative mean girl from Dallas and Amy's sassy step-sister, gives the show the appearance of being "Post-Gay" since her character is not used to advance a progressive political message. On the contrary, she presents as a homophobic, stun-gun-carrying Republican who just happens to be intersex (Figure 11). Lauren is the first intersex character on television to be portrayed by an intersex actor (Bailey Young). Her adherence to rigid gender roles, and her history as a Dallas pageant show pony (think *Toddlers in Tiaras* meets *Dirty Dancing*), along with her conservative politics present a challenge to the traditional representation of LGBTQIA youth as being the vulnerable victims of societal bullying and bigotry. Just as *Pretty Little Liars* presented queer queen bees whose sexuality did not create an obstacle to their power or popularity, *Faking It's* queer utopia further subverts the traditional association between queer youth and victimhood.

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<sup>42</sup> David Bergman, "Closet-dwellers of the Mind," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 11, no. 6, (2004):15.



Fig. 11: “Cinderella Carries a Gun.” On Halloween, Lauren, dressed as Disney’s Cinderella, pulls her stun gun on an unsuspecting Liam who was trying to return her glass slipper. Carter Covington and Erica Peterson, “Spooking It,” *Faking It*, season 3, episode 6, directed by Patrick Norris, aired April 19, 2016

Similarly, Noah (Elliot Fletcher), a trans boy, complicates the traditional narrative of trans lives, and the conflation of gender identity and sexuality, through his sexual orientation. Noah, who identifies as gay, becomes Shane Harvey’s love interest in the last season as he struggles with bouts of homelessness. As with the case of Bailey Young, the producers wanted an FTM actor to play the role of Noah and they ultimately picked Elliot Young who is known for his groundbreaking roles in *The Fosters* and *Shameless*. The series’ ability to represent a trans character who is also gay rests squarely on the shoulders of the previous decade of programming which introduced the first trans characters, which were subject to brittle politics of representation that believed it was harmful to “undermine” transgender characters by associating their gender identity with a homosexual orientation.

*Faking It*'s reliance on Hester High as a queer utopia further bolsters Covington's vision of "post-gay" programming. In an exclusive interview with BuzzFeed, Covington explained that as a volunteer for the Trevor Project, a suicide and crisis hotline for LGBT youth, he wanted to provide viewers with "a vision of what high school could look like that's not dealing with bullying and homophobia."<sup>43</sup> When reflecting on the stories he's heard that were more like Hester High, he decided, "why not exaggerate it?" This exaggerated vision of a place and time, in which "being gay is perfectly acceptable... in fact... it makes you unique," constitutes Covington's idea of a queer utopia.

Despite Covington's belief in the arrival of "post-gay" media, it is difficult to play with the trope of fake lesbians while earnestly representing sexual fluidity, and many fans considered *Faking It* to be a harmful representation. The series was arguably one of the most hated on queer pop culture sites *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*. The show, owned by Viacom, was not renewed for a fourth season. The show's creators explained that this was not due to the content of the show, nor any tension with the network. It seems that *Faking It* was competing for viewers with MTV's other popular comedy *Awkward*, a series about an awkward girl who is mistakenly presumed to have attempted suicide, despite merely having an accident due to her awkward nature. MTV is not known for delicate or moralistic representations of sensitive themes. *Awkward* aired in July of 2011 and had a more established fan base, possibly contributing to the lack luster ratings for *Faking It*. However, there is good reason to believe that rejection by LGBTQ fans played a role as well.

A brief look at reactions by culture critics and fans expose resistance to the post-gay genre. *Faking It* was criticized for gay-baiting, or the manipulation of queer fans through hints about a

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<sup>43</sup> Louis Peitzman, "What's Next for Karma and Amy After the Shocking Season Finale of Faking It," *BuzzFeed*, June 10, 2014. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/louispeitzman/whats-next-for-karma-and-amy-after-the-shocking-season-final>

mounting on-screen relationship between two characters that have been ‘shipped’<sup>44</sup> by the online community, used merely to keep queers watching, without ever delivering on such relationships. Viewers particularly resented Karma who engages in queer behaviors and feelings but refuses to recognize them as such as she continues to pursue Liam while demanding the undivided attention of Amy. Fans expected a narrative shift which would embrace Karma and Amy as a queer couple, and acknowledge the discrepancy between Karma’s belief in the performance, and her true feelings for her best friend. Fans were especially disappointed when Covington revealed to the *Hollywood Reporter*, “It was always my intention to make ‘Karmy’ happen during our final season. Karma would finally realize that her possessiveness of Amy might be a sign of deeper feelings for her best friend.”<sup>45</sup> These fans were outraged that Covington strung them along, and wasted precious narrative time cultivating Karma’s infatuation with Liam, and Liam’s quest to seduce lesbians, as opposed to developing an intimate relationship between the two female protagonists.

Viewers were especially outraged over *Faking It*’s representation of sexual fluidity which came to a head when Amy and Liam, in drunken anger and grief over Karma’s deception, sleep together in the season 1 finale. For these viewers, the series’ portrayal of fluidity was reduced to the trope of another queer girl sleeping with a guy. This harmful representation was compounded by the already problematic premise of Karma performing queer desire for a man’s attention. An author known as Riese on *Autostraddle* who wrote recaps of every episode, created a chart to emphasize the drop in viewership following the finale in which Amy has sex with Liam, and the

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Shipped is a term which emerged in fan fiction communities to connote a relationship between two characters. The relationship can be platonic or romantic, but often two characters that have been ‘shipped by fans do not have an explicit onscreen relationship but are reimagined as a pair by the online community.

<sup>45</sup> Carter Covington, “Faking It Boss Reveals What Would have Happened in Emotional Letter to Fans (Exclusive),” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 17, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/faking-what-would-have-happened-894311>

subsequent second half of season 2 in which she pursues Felix instead of finding a girl at Hester to date (Figure 12).

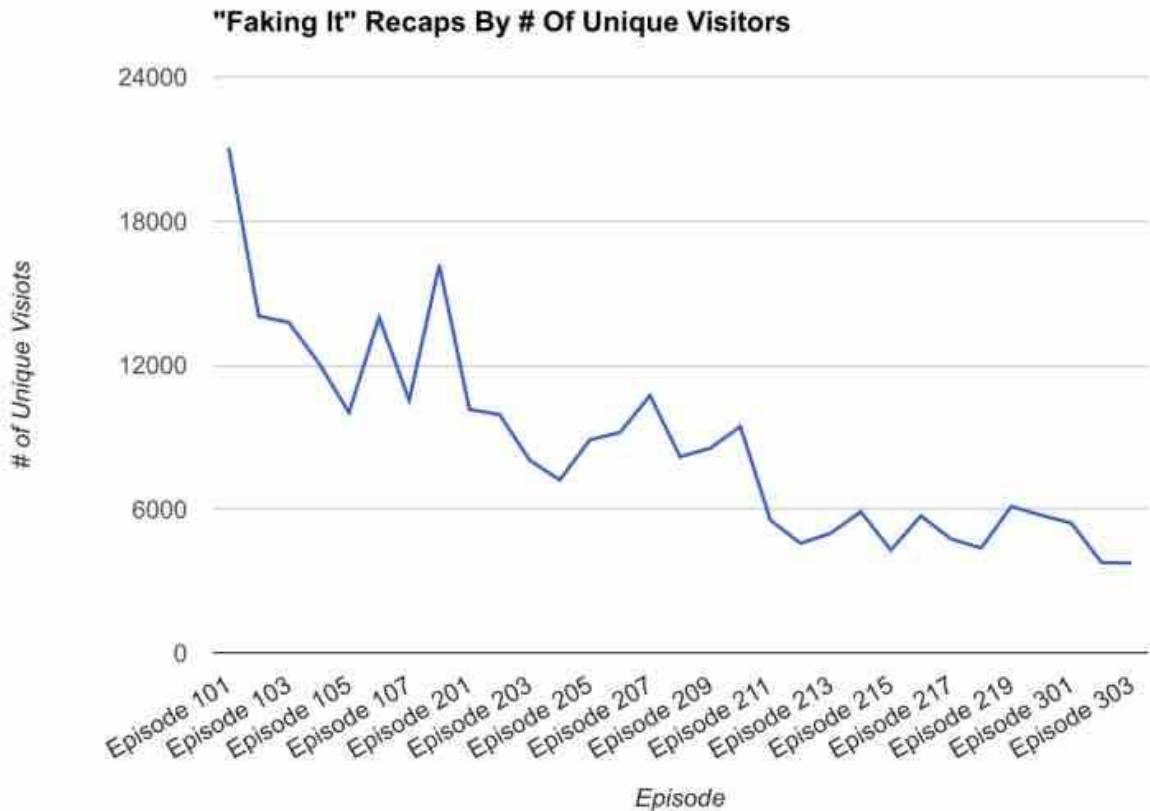


Fig. 12: “Drop in Viewership.” According to *Autostraddle*, there was a sharp decline in readership (over sixty percent) since the first season. Riese, “Faking It Episode 304 Recap: Can Anybody Find Amy Somebody To Love?” *Autostraddle*, April 6, 2016. <https://www.autostraddle.com/faking-it-episode-304-recap-jagged-little-heart-334410/>

Riese makes it clear that the community of queer fans were not rejecting the show for Amy’s fluid sexual exploration, but rather for the all-to-common trope of a “confused” queer girl who ends up sleeping with a man only to discover that she wants to date men again. Riese rejects Covington’s claim, that *Faking It*’s LGBT focus may have turned away a larger audience, as

“short-sighted.”<sup>46</sup> Riese explains, “LGBT fans are a passionate bunch! It’s true that statistically speaking, we’re an incredibly small slice of the population, but that’s changing, especially for the teens in MTV’s target demographic....”<sup>47</sup> Citing the myopic narrative focus on Karma and Liam, and “the relentless conversation around Amy and Liam’s drunken romp,” Riese doubts that the problem was “not enough straight people tuning in,” but rather, “too many queer women tuning out.”<sup>48</sup> *Faking It* presents an important example of a contemporary series marketed as an LGBT teen show that was ultimately rejected by queer fans. This rejection reveals an important area of future study regarding the evolving standards of representation and understanding of identity which will be explored further in the final section.

### **Fake It Till You Make It: Final Reflections on *Faking It*’s Contribution to Representation**

This chapter analyzed how MTV’s *Faking It* challenged the traditional adolescent coming-out narrative through a story about best friends who perform queer desire and end up questioning sexuality, identity, community, and the limitations of friendship. A close viewing of the series, informed by Esther Saxey’s monograph on stock coming-out literature, Jason Jacob’s foucauldian reading of ontologized gay identity in teen programming, and recent scholarship on post-gay rhetoric in television, illustrated the sometimes heavy handed ways that *Faking It* queered the coming-out story arc. Rebecca Nicholson says it best when describing *Faking It* as “a progressive show that explores and questions the very nature of progressiveness.”<sup>49</sup> *Faking It* ultimately questions the politics of representation that were celebrated mere years before its launch, in the height of gay-positive media.

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<sup>46</sup> Riese, “Faking It Episode 310 Recap: But I Know What I Want Now!” *Autostraddle*, May 17, 2016. <https://www.autostraddle.com/faking-it-episode-310-recap-but-i-know-what-i-want-now-338685/>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Nicholson, “MTV’s Faking It: A Surprisingly Sophisticated Teen Comedy.”

At the same time, while *Faking It* mocks progressive communities and “PC culture,” the series’ displays of diversity are often superficial. The cast is nearly all white, with the exception of Lauren’s first serious boyfriend, a black undercover cop posing as a high school student whose performance bleeds into reality, as is typical of relationships on this show, as he develops genuine feelings of love and affection for her. Unfortunately, like so many other television shows, *Faking It* relied exclusively on femme girls, and failed to visually represent a diversified queer community of adolescents.

Future studies of *Faking It* as a post-gay series should focus on Lauren as one of the first significant intersex characters on television whose role as a homophobic, initially closeted antagonist supports the neoliberal logic of homophobia as being a problem among individuals, as opposed to a systemic issue. Additionally, future analysis of *Faking It* ought to further explore the series’ message about romantic attachments as being varied and heterogeneous. Looking beyond Amy’s relationship to Karma, and instead at her contemporaneous attachments to Felix and Sabrina could paint a clearer picture of the representation of adolescent sexuality as being polyamorous and fluid.

The series’ finale ends with the lesson that lying about a version of yourself, your sexuality, can actually allow you to embrace a new truth. While fans hoped that this revelation would come from Karma, interrogating her feelings for Amy, it came in the form of a rather unpopular character. Sabrina, who had been pretending to question her sexuality to get closer with Amy, and to tear her away from her summer camp nemesis Karma, declares, “Amy Raudenfield, I’m in love with you... and all the lying, the possessiveness has been about that. And I know it sounds weird but lying about my sexuality made me see the truth.”<sup>50</sup> Contrary to the Gay Pride rhetoric of

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<sup>50</sup> George Northy and Carrie Rosen, “Up in Flames,” *Faking It*, season 3 episode 10, directed by Jeff Melman, aired May 17, 2016

closeted cowards living a lie, *Faking It* reveals that queerness can be learned, performed, fabricated, and still lead to further sexual exploration. This moral conjures up the film *Were The World Mine*, the 2008 romantic musical fantasy about a teenage boy who uses a love potion to turn his bigoted classmates and townsfolk gay only to discover that his crush from the rugby team was gay all along and just needed a social experiment to act on his feelings. This link to a film like *Were The World Mine* further positions the series in a the genre of queer utopia. *Faking It's* innovation ultimately comes in the dramatic, often ridiculous celebration of adolescent antics which reveal sexuality, identity and community as performative expressions as opposed to fixed points on a journey of sexual development.



### Chapter 3: “Just your typical all-American, Catholic, divorcing, disgraced, lawbreaking, gay family”: Queering the Sitcom with ABC’s *The Real O’Neals*

Bingo Bonanza, a fundraising night at Saint Barklay’s Church, ends in scandal when Pat O’Neal (Jay R. Ferguson), Chicago PD father of three, calls for a family meeting over the walkie-talkies. His wife Eileen (Martha Plimpton), we are told, is the chair of the event, a position which combines her two favorite things: serving the church, and having everyone watch her do it. Using a problem at the brownie bar as a ruse to get the family matriarch and trio of O’Neal offspring to follow, Pat lays down the law. Breaking every taboo of the perfect family, he hisses, “Can’t you see we’re screwing up our kids with our whole Irish-Catholic not talking about things? We can’t corned-beef this!”<sup>51</sup>

This declaration opens up the floodgates of family secrets to come, and the full exposure of the O’Neals, not as they appear in the church bulletin, but as they really are—the *real* O’Neals. As the name implies, ABC’s family sitcom delves into the messy lives of an Irish-American Catholic family in Chicago. In fact, every episode, save for the pilot, contains “real” in the title. Eileen and Pat, we learn, are in couple’s therapy and getting divorced. Shannon (Bebe Wood), the Brainiac sister and youngest of the O’Neal children, is laundering her church charity money to buy a car. Jimmy (Matt Shively), the eldest sibling, a ditzy jock who still believes in Santa, has developed disordered eating habits from his regular weigh-ins as a high school wrestler. At the heart of the family, and the sitcom, is protagonist, narrator and middle child, Kenny O’Neal (Noah Galvin), a witty, self-absorbed, neurotic teenager who comes out to his family, and the entire eavesdropping church community, at Bingo Bonanza.

ABC’s *The Real O’Neals* is the first network television show with a gay teenager as both

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<sup>51</sup> All quotations from the series were transcribed by the author. Casey Johnson & David Windsor, and Joshua Sternin & Jennifer Ventimilia, “Pilot,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Todd Holland, aired March 2, 2016

the protagonist and narrator. While most series devote only a mere episode, or brief story arc to a character's experience with coming-out, this series filters every family drama through the lens of Kenny discovering what he believes to be gay culture, and his desire to become successful in his new imagined queer community. Despite being utterly ignored by scholars of queer media, and getting canceled after only two seasons, *The Real O'Neals* serves as a unique case study for understanding the evolving positionality of gay adolescent subjects from the margins of television programming, to the center of the network family sitcom. More importantly, this shift in media representation mirrors changes in cultural discourse about sexuality, youth, and what constitutes as the mainstream. This chapter will critically examine *The Real O'Neal's* contributions to queer adolescent programming through the series' experimental mixture between stereotypical gay subculture and clichéd Irish Catholic family life, and what this novel association between Christianity and gay youth may project about shifting mainstream American values.

Perhaps the best way to understand how *The Real O'Neals* challenges the traditional spatial relationship between homosexuality at the margins, and mainstream Christianity at the center, is through Ann Pellegrini's discursive studies of religion and American culture. Ann Pellegrini, a professor of Performance Studies and Social and Cultural Analysis at NYU, is best known for her prolific contributions to understanding the role of sexuality in shaping contemporary discourse around religious freedom. In her 2003 book *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, co-authored with Barnard professor Janet R. Jakobsen, Pellegrini brilliantly underscores the forces which have shaped societal understandings of the American public at large as being inherently white, Christian and heterosexual. This dominant image of "real Americans"

who constitute the audience in raging culture wars over abortion, welfare reform, gay marriage, and gender neutral bathrooms, establishes a “center.”<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, subjects who deviate from this definition of the average citizen populate the “margins” and must be evaluated by the standards of the center without ever disrupting the spatial hierarchy. In this model, a gay American subject is inconceivable, as is a queer Christian subject, since the homosexual minority status subsumes the entire identity of the individual. The minority status, in contrast to the neutral and invisible status in the center, marks the member in the margins as something *other than*. Kenny O’Neal, as the first teenage narrator and protagonist to effortlessly embody both a gay and Christian identity, represents a softening of boundaries between the center and the margins, and the assimilation of certain types of sexual minorities into the American mainstream. The relevance of *The Real O’Neals* in this study of adolescent programming thus lies in the series message about the relationship between “queer” and “mainstream America.”

According to Pellegrini, the “hierarchical relation between a dominant center and its margins” maintains an “us-them relation in which “we” tolerate “them.”<sup>53</sup> *The Real O’Neals*, as part of a larger trend in adolescent programming, relying on a gay character as the protagonist, and as the show’s sole narrative voice, questions who constitutes the “we.” The series subverts the outsider status of the queer adolescent in the American mainstream through a sitcom that does not tolerate the teen, but instead makes him the moral arbiter of the show. This is in stark contrast to previous decades of programming which situated gay and lesbian teens in supporting roles, often

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<sup>52</sup> Pellegrini’s “center” compliments the “charmed circle” theorized by Gayle Rubin in which certain sexual behaviors between certain individuals is considered good and natural, while behaviors and actors that deviate from the inner charmed circle are seen as deviant and damned. In the case of *The Real O’Neals*, according to Rubin’s 1984 essay “Thinking Sex,” “heterosexual” and “procreative” sex are part of the charmed circle, while “homosexual” and “non-procreative” sex are in the “outer limits.” While Rubin identifies types of sex that form a center and the margins, Pellegrini imagines an imagined public of groups and individuals who are seen as good and part of the community. Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003): 50.

suffering their status in the margins of social life, as queer viewers suffered the characters' status in the margins of the television series.

My analysis will explore the superimposition of popularized gay subculture with mainstream, middle America in *The Real O'Neals*. The first section will examine the initial reception to the series through the lens of homonormativity. The second section will assess the series' remapping of Pellegrini's Christian heterosexual center and the queer margins through the central role of the gay teen as both protagonist and narrator. Kenny's voiceover narration, and the prominence of imaginary sequences and musical numbers imbued with cinematic gay subculture all serve to rethink the center of the sitcom, and reimagine the attitudes of the audience. The third section will analyze the show's novel association between religion and homosexuality, and the reimagining of the American public with the gay adolescent "insider" helping viewers understand an Irish Catholic family. The final section will examine audience reception among Catholics, and queer identified fans, and what we can learn about anxieties of assimilation and the commodification of queer youth.

### **"He's gay. Shocking! Or it would be, that is, if this were still the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century": Homonormativity and the New Gay Sitcom**

From the onset, *The Real O'Neals* as a groundbreaking contribution to LGBT media was met with skepticism. Many questioned how a sitcom about a cisgender teenage boy with a white, upper middle-class Christian family could possibly be subversive, or respond adequately to the call for diversified media representation. A *New York Times* review,<sup>54</sup> dated a day before the series' release, disparagingly states, "*The Real O'Neals* wants desperately to be the brash new sitcom... a

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<sup>54</sup> Neil Genzlinger, "Review: A Family Full of Secrets in 'The Real O'Neals,'" *The NY Times*, March 1, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/arts/television/review-a-family-full-of-secrets-in-the-real-oneals.html>

decade or two ago it might have been... The biggest secret involves the younger son... He's gay. Shocking! Or it would be, that is, if this were still the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century." Critics and viewers alike assumed the show would be too white washed, and not queer enough, and wondered if there was still a market for a traditional story about coming-out to the nuclear family. Reviews by pop culture sites include headlines like "Despite Controversy, Nothing Really New In ABC Comedy."<sup>55</sup> Similarly, *Variety* which refers to the fledgling series as "toothless" and "edge-blunting" further echoes that "The idea of a gay son scandalizing a conservative Irish-Catholic... doesn't feel as novel as it once might have."<sup>56</sup>

The assumption that today's teenagers would not be able to relate to, or benefit from a show like *The Real O'Neals* was not lost on the cast. In a Television Critics Association (TCA)<sup>57</sup> panel hosted 2 months before the air date, Noah Galvin suggested that "There is a very clear distinction between how young people view the show as opposed to older people, who [may] have gone through this... I'm gay myself and I haven't gone through a lot of the things that Kenny goes through in the series." Galvin, who at the time was 21 years old, wondered to himself, "Is this crazy, is it new and groundbreaking?" but, after showing the pilot to an older friend, discovered that he was "astounded by it." This suggestion that the new sitcom would have greater appeal to viewers from an older generation may, in part, explain the seemingly old-fashioned version of gay culture represented on the show.

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<sup>55</sup> Dominic Patten, "The Real O'Neals Review: Despite Controversy, Nothing Really New In ABC Comedy," *Deadline*, February 23, 2016. <https://deadline.com/2016/02/the-real-oneals-review-abc-comedy-dan-savage-video-1201708116/>

<sup>56</sup> Brian Lowry, "TV Review: The Real O'Neals," *Variety*, February 29, 2016. <https://variety.com/2016/tv/reviews/the-real-oneals-review-dan-savage-martha-plimpton-abc-1201713824/>

<sup>57</sup> Jim Halterman, "The Real O'Neals Star Noah Galvin: My Coming Out Was A Lot Different Than My Character's," *Logo's New Now Next*, January 10, 2016. <http://www.newnownext.com/real-oneals-noah-galvin-gay-tca/01/2016/>

As this chapter will explore further in the third section devoted to reliance on the gay teen as our guide for understanding the Catholic family, the role of columnist Dan Savage as an executive producer of *The Real O'Neals* gives some insight into the specific brand of gay subculture portrayed on the show, and the tenor of the sitcom's humor. The series is loosely based on Savage's upbringing as a gay kid in an Irish Catholic family, but, as we shall see, even more shaped by Savage's It Gets Better Campaign, launched in 2010 on the heels of a perceived spike in LGBT adolescent suicide. Savage's influence, however understated, dates the show for its appeal to a white, cisgender, upper middle class subculture of the 1980's. Furthermore, as an extension of It Gets Better, *The Real O'Neals* may come off as a product of the previous decade, a time characterized by the uncertain future of same-sex marriage rights in the 50 states. In March of 2016, when the series aired, a show about coming-out in high school, starting a GSA, and fighting to take a same-gender date to prom felt oddly out of place in a post-gay marriage America.

Critics who dismiss the show as normative or outdated often fail to recognize the tongue-in-cheek portrayal of gay adolescence which does not take itself too seriously. *The Real O'Neals* playfully satirizes notions of gay pride and militancy, as well as bourgeois anxieties of assimilation, through a naïve teenager who wants to be the voice of a generation, anointed by a pair of rainbow knee socks. Ultimately, this chapter will reveal how *The Real O'Neals* queers the American family sitcom, infusing camp and kitsch with formulaic family fiascos, but also how the sitcom has commodified LGBTQ youth, and sneakily syndicated these sexualities for mainstream consumption.

The repositioning of the gay teen to "the center" amplified anxieties over assimilation into mainstream culture, and the betrayal of queer life in the margins. Many of these anxieties echo critiques of homonormativity, a prescribed way to be gay that mimics the structure, values and politics of mainstream capitalist society. Lisa Duggan, an NYU professor of American Studies

known for her scholarship on homonationalism and pinkwashing defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>58</sup> While some may question how gay teenagers could ever constitute a normative, politically privileged demographic, others skeptical of media representation as a product of homonormativity may have concerns about the conservative social mores propagated by these gay TV narratives.

As Tison Pugh ponders in *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*, his comprehensive analysis of gender and sexuality in iconic domestic sitcoms from *Leave It To Beaver* to *Modern Family*, the very concept of homonormativity is often taken for granted without acknowledging the implied meaning of a quasi-oxymoron. His final chapter analyzes ABC’s *Modern Family* (2009- present), the mockumentary single-camera family sitcom about the extended Pritchett family, rendered “modern” by two relationships: aging white patriarch Jay Pritchett’s relationship to his much younger wife Gloria, a Colombian firecracker, and her poetic pan-flute playing son Manny; and Jay’s gay son, a lawyer married to a theatrical former linebacker who presents their new baby girl, adopted from Vietnam, to the opening theme from *The Lion King*.

*Modern Family*, as a domestic sitcom from the previous decade, was arguably a major trailblazer that paved the way for *The Real O’Neals* on the very same network. When analyzing criticisms of the series, particularly for reliance on gay stereotypes and a traditional family dynamic, Pugh suggests that “... the conservatism that some viewers see in the show could also

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<sup>58</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), 179.

reflect the shifting mores around marriage and queer culture generally.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, the representation of homosexuality through a married gay couple with a child on a *family* sitcom implies that the definition of the American family in the mainstream imaginary has been expanded to include lesbian and gay couples. Additionally, mainstream views of gays and lesbians have expanded to include images of parenthood and suburban drudgery. Instead of merely dismissing this shift in representation as normative, Pugh interrogates the deeper significance of homonormativity, arguing that “Homonormativity productively complicates the very meaning of normativity, it upsets any semantic assumption that homosexuality and cultural norms are unequivocally at odds with each other.”<sup>60</sup> In the case of *The Real O’Neals*, the perception of Kenny, a faithful Catholic gay high schooler, as a *normative* representation, conjures a similar debate about the relationship between queer adolescence and cultural norms, and brings into question Pellegrini’s demarcation that makes a queer Christian subject impossible in American discourse. In other words, where exactly does Kenny exist between Pellegrini’s “center” of the imaginary American mainstream public, and the “margins”? To explore this query, and larger questions about what a gay teen sitcom may reveal about shifting values in mainstream America, we now turn to our self-described Gay Moses, Kenny O’Neal, and his narrative voice.

### **Gay Moses Speaks (and Sings!)**

The family sitcom has long been considered the low-brow, all-American narrative form. Like baseball, the family sitcom is a great American pastime infused with nostalgia for an imagined past of family togetherness, and a sense of national heritage. When one imagines the American public, or the “center” described by Pellegrini, it often involves nuclear families gathered

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<sup>59</sup> Tison Pugh, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018): 172.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid



around the T.V. watching their favorite televised American families. Both the family of spectators and the family on the screen are part of this familiar center. Deviations from the white, Christian, middle class norms have been perennially studied by scholars of popular culture as the complex negotiation of insider-outsider status in America, and a shifting understanding of who the center can hold. Books, articles and dissertations on popular family sitcoms that brought questions of race, class, gender and sexuality to the center of family life have been hailed for their revolutionary power, and similarly deconstructed for their normative, conservative political messages (for some of the most historical examples, see *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne*, and *Modern Family*.) The power that these deviations hold, in popular culture and academia, lies in the medium of the family sitcom, wafting through the living room like apple pie. When unexpected protagonists and perspectives make it into the American living room every week, scholars typically imagine a change in the cultural center, and the sacrifices made by the margins to become palatable for the mainstream.

*The Real O'Neals* takes this consideration a step further by providing viewers not only with a main character who is young and queer, but more importantly, a narrator who gives us intimate access to his thoughts, day dreams and fantasies. The positioning of the gay teenager in the center of the narrative, and as the sole narrator, challenges the traditional representation of queer adolescence on television as an outsider experience mediated by the sitcom for the audience. Instead, Kenny mediates our understanding of his heterosexual peers and family members. Far from presenting Kenny as a typical narrator, or a typical teenage boy who just happens to be gay, the series plays with flamboyant, stereotyped tropes of gay culture when revealing his inner life through musical fantasies.

Many sitcoms about adolescence and family life have relied on voiceover narration to heighten the point of view of the protagonist. In the case of adolescence, this narration is similar to

a diary conveying descriptive language about the autobiographical details of quotidian family life, as well as the teen's unique take on the world. The use of the middle child as narrator is not unusual, and may even be viewed as a television trope in light of Fox's popular family sitcom *Malcom in the Middle* (2000-2006) in which Malcom (Frankie Muniz), the boy-genius middle<sup>61</sup> child, broke the fourth wall and narrated directly to the audience.

*The Real O'Neals* is the first family sitcom to rely on a gay character, and a teenager nonetheless, as the series' narrator. With Kenny as the sitcom's narrator, the perspective of the gay teenager becomes the sole point of view of the audience, making it easy for viewers to identify with him as the voice of reason in his wacky, lovable family. Pugh ascribes this centering of gay perspectives to "...the possibility that straight people will see themselves in gay characters."<sup>62</sup> This reversal of insider-outsider status, he posits, "accords a revolutionary power to gay characters who could nonetheless be construed as stereotypically gay and unthreateningly conservative."<sup>63</sup> Unlike *Modern Family*, which often utilizes the family patriarchs Jay, and his goofy son-in-law Phil, to deliver the voiceover message in the episode's finale, *The Real O'Neals* always relies on "gay Moses," the voice of a generation, as the authoritative voice on the show.

Kenny's narration describes and explains the actions of those around him, allowing him to end with a public service announcement at the end of each episode with lessons learned about faith, family, and "fruit flies." The voice-over is often used to convey a universal message about coming-out intended not just for Kenny himself, but for his friends and family, and the imagined audience of viewers and their families. This voiceover is paired with video of other characters, implying that the lessons Kenny imparts for the gay teen somehow apply just as much to his straight family. For

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<sup>61</sup> Lest this guide be accused of inaccuracy, Malcom was the middle child of the kids in the house. There was an older brother sent off to a military academy, and towards the end of the series, a new baby. This technically makes Malcom the third of five children.

<sup>62</sup> Pugh, 180.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

example, “The Real Thang,” an episode about National Coming Out Day, ends with Kenny’s voice over about how coming-out is not the same for everyone. Kenny is so caught up in his fantasy of leading other queer youths to the light of truth, visibility and pride, he neglects to go through the “anonymous” Q&A box in which Allison, the only other member of his fledgling Gay Straight Alliance, has submitted a critical question: “Should I come out to my parents even if they’ve said they would kick me out if I’m gay?” After realizing that he put his friend in danger by making his journey the gold standard by which all queer teens should live by, and acknowledging that it is not yet safe for Allison to come out, Kenny preaches, “So National Coming Out Day wasn’t as big as I expected, but I guess we all have to come out in our own way.”<sup>64</sup>

While viewers assume his message is about Allison, the voice-over narrates over images of the other, heterosexual characters including Eileen, having just accepted her attraction for the nerdy spandex adorned Vice Principal, holding his hand for the first time. As the voiceover continues, Kenny explains, “You can come out to just one person... or you can come out to the world” as the screen shifts to Aunt Jodie strutting down the runway of a plus size fashion show. This unexpected pairing of audio and visuals implies that the series’ Public Service Announcements about learning how to come out apply equally to the heterosexual majority, possibly implicating a larger message about both the assimilation of gay teenagers from the margins to the center, and the evolution of the center as being less repressed by “the closet” of shame and repression. The wisdom and authority of the gay adolescent is preserved, with the implication that his experiences as a minority somehow benefitted the “center” or majority.

Pugh brings up a similar manipulation of voice-over in *Modern Family* in which many “episodes end with overt moralizing, as a character speaks in voice-over to apprise viewers of the

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<sup>64</sup> Casey Johnson and David Windsor, “The Real Thang,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 1, directed by Todd Holland, aired October 11, 2016

lessons learned over the preceding twenty-two minutes.” Usually delivered by one of the patriarchs, the audio, which reeks of an Aesop fable, seems to be in reference to a specific character or issue portrayed in the narrative arc of the episode but instead is revealed to be about someone or something else. Pugh describes this technique as “‘bait-and-switch’ moralism, in which the audience is tricked into believing an episode is divulging its didactic lesson only then to see that the moral does not cohere with the narrative action” which ultimately “undoes the assumed connection between words and visuals that television, in most cases, seeks to preserve.”<sup>65</sup> While *Modern Family*, according to Pugh, does this in a post-modern fashion which renders the voice-over moral meaningless or empty, *The Real O’Neals’* pairing of gay PSAs with straight, Catholic characters is earnest, trying their very best to prove that Kenny’s life lessons and emotional growth are universal to the whole family. This further serves to *center* the gay teen and *queer* the “center” or mainstream American family.

In addition to voiceover narration, the sitcom deepens the sense of a queer interiority by showing us Kenny’s daydreams. His stream of consciousness and inner thoughts all play on cinematic popularized notions of gay subculture via musical numbers, queer iconography, and bodybuilder fitness fantasies. This further illustrates how Kenny is not being packaged as a “neutral” narrator who just happens to be gay, but as a teenager who is beginning to understand himself in a larger context of queer popular culture. He not only speaks to us, he sings and dances when getting dumped (Figure 13), joining a homoerotic gym (Figure 14), and seeking an elder queer role model at school (Figure 15).

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<sup>65</sup> Pugh, 166.



Fig. 13: “It Must Have Been Love.” Kenny, grieving his first serious relationship, feels trapped in a 90s music video and sings Roxette’s “It must Have Been Love.” Rob Sudduth, “The Real Heartbreak,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 14, directed by Kevin Bray, aired February 28, 2017. Unless otherwise specified, all screen grabs were captured by the author from *The Real O’Neals* on Amazon Prime Video.



Fig. 14: “Let’s Get Physical.” Kenny imagines what the CrossFit gym will be like as he performs Olivia Newton-John’s “Physical.” Sam Laybourne, “The Real Fit,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 6, directed by Elliot Hegarty, aired November 29, 2016



Fig. 15: “Do Re Mi.” Kenny hopes the new gay teacher at Saint Barklays will become his role model and imagines the two performing “Do Re Mi” from *The Sound of Music*. Adam Roberts, “The Real Mr. Nice Guy,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 15, directed by Jaffar Mahmood, aired March 7, 2017

Capitalizing on Noah Galvin’s experiences as a stage actor (after shooting the sitcom, he went on to become the replacement lead in the Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen*) the series introduced an original show tune about Kenny getting his first boyfriend in which Galvin prances through the neighborhood with pencil-animated little birds ala Disney’s *Snow White* (Figure 16).



Fig. 16: “I Have a Boyfriend.” (left) Snow White, “A Smile and a Song,” *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937 (right) Noah Galvin performs original song “I Have a Boyfriend.” Josh Kirby and Jon Veles, “The Real Acceptance,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 10, directed by Victor Nelli, Jr., aired January 17, 2017

It is important to remember that Kenny, as the center of the show, renders the entire series flamboyant, homoerotic and very much a part of the same in-crowd. As opposed to being a character that is laughed at, he is the star we are laughing with, sharing inside jokes from a queer inner-circle. The fact that this inner-circle, in actuality, is made up by the demographic of people who would watch a family sitcom on ABC, makes the spatial relation all the more interesting. Given the “dated” or “old fashioned” universe of the show described previously, and Dan Savage’s own involvement in the creation, it becomes difficult to parse ABC’s own understanding of the intended audience for *The Real O’Neals*. As Pugh explains in his book, from its inception, the domestic, or family sitcom was meant to appeal to each member of the traditional family, hence the advertisements on the networks for children, teenagers, and adults. If *The Real O’Neals* was intended for an audience of mainstream American families, what does the centrality of gay humor and queer fantasies say about expectations of mainstream America?

This tension between such a stylized performance of queerness and the imagined mainstream, middle American audience, conjures fears of pink face, or the overly stereotyped,

caricatured representation of effeminate gay characters for the viewing pleasure of the powerful majority. Interestingly, Noah Galvin began his television debut in controversy for an interview he gave to *Vulture* in which he criticized, among other things, the pink face performance of Eric Stonestreet (Cameron Tucker, married to Mitchell Pritchett-Tucker on *Modern Family*) as a straight man “playing a caricature of a caricature of a stereotype of (a) stereotype on *Modern Family*.”<sup>66</sup> Galvin came off, to many, as entitled, arrogant and militant. His interview used several four-letter words that would have received the wrath of his mother’s pinching fingers, and a stern whisper hissing, “Kenneth Christopher Sebastian O’Neal, do you pray to Jesus with that mouth?” In contrast, Galvin came into fame as an “out” actor who openly called out homophobic casting in Hollywood. He told fans and reporters about being called “too gay” for certain gay parts, and being passed over for straight, closeted or more “straight passing” actors. For the creators of *The Real O’Neals*, it was important to feature a gay actor in the role of Kenny. Executive producer Todd Holland told *New Now Next* that while they never quizzed auditioning actors about their orientation, “it was very important to me that a gay kid play this role.” The casting of Noah Galvin further complicates any overly simplified critiques of pink face on the show since the network, in a rare move, sought to attach a real gay face to their series and cross the boundary between the sitcom’s messaging and Galvin’s own politics.

It is interesting to note how some of Kenny’s fantasies are overt references to gay sitcom predecessors, particularly shows that were simultaneously criticized for being too conservative but also lauded for impacting positive change. When contemplating how to come-out to his girlfriend Mimi, Kenny has a *Will and Grace* fantasy based on the iconic sitcom about the relationship between a straight woman and a gay man who are best friends (Figure 17). The NBC sitcom, which

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<sup>66</sup> E. Alex Jung, “Noah Galvin Has Nothing to Hide,” *Vulture*, June 9, 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/06/noah-galvin-has-nothing-to-hide.html>



ran from 1998 to 2006, was credited for using comedy to bring gay subculture to mainstream America, and lauded by former Vice President Joe Biden as a catalyst for evolving cultural attitudes about gay marriage.<sup>67</sup> Biden, and many others, understood the significance of the sitcom genre as a lowbrow, popular form of entertainment showing strong associations with mainstream American culture and values.



Fig. 17: “GBFF.” Will and Grace fantasy sequence. Casey Johnson and David Windsor, “The Real Papaya,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Todd Holland, aired March 2, 2016

In Kenny’s fantasy sequence, he reveals himself as gay to Mimi who embraces him as her “GBFF,”<sup>68</sup> or Gay Best Friend Forever, to the sound of canned studio audience reactions. While paying homage to a show which paved the way for *The Real O’Neals*, the *Will and Grace* daydream scene also reveals how Kenny is beginning to define himself through the context of popular, commodified, syndicated gay culture. This reads as a nod to queer youth today whose

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<sup>67</sup> Biden, indicating his support for gay unions, explained, “I think ‘Will & Grace’ probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has ever done so far.” For the full interview, see David Eldridge, “Biden ‘comfortable’ with gay marriage, cites ‘Will & Grace,’” *The Washington Times*, May 6, 2012. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/may/6/biden-will-grace-educated-public-about-gays/>

<sup>68</sup> Pixie Wespiser and Kent Zbornak, “The Real Papaya,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Todd Holland, aired March 2, 2016

understandings about identity and community are shaped by television, film, and social media, and, the series hopes, sitcoms like *The Real O'Neals*.

The role of narrative voice in the larger debate over positionality between the center and the margins can ultimately be seen in the fate of the ABC sitcom. Noah Galvin suffered for the bold expression of his politics in *Vulture*, and his unapologetic queer militancy in the public eye—likely inspired by Dan Savage—as rumors circulated about the network threatening to re-order episodes of the fledgling series. In this case, it seems that the subject from the margins, who was brought into the center, was not quite palatable for mainstream consumption. Since the series ended, Galvin has yet to be seen on television and instead has retreated back into the arguably more niche medium of theater. Similarly, the series, which brought Galvin, an out and in-your-face actor, and his flamboyant character, to the center of the network sitcom, ultimately suffered as it was canceled before being renewed for a third season. *The Real O'Neals* did not appeal to their mainstream ABC audience as much as they had hoped, and may have lost a queer demographic because they appeared too palatable for middle America. What were the messages the series conveyed about its traditional, church going characters, and how did the series attempt to bridge the spatial gap between queer fantasy and catholic spirituality?

### **The Son of God and the Middle Son of Eileen**

In addition to the series' play with marginality and centrality, and American family values with gay culture, *The Real O'Neals* also queers the traditional association between religion and homosexuality. As Pellegrini articulates, religion in America is viewed as the moral framework that opposes homosexuality, as opposed to a flexible and varied spectrum of values that could favor the deregulation of the body. Kenny seamlessly and uncritically embodies both his role as faith leader and twink (the term he finally settles on, with the help of his brother and sister, after reading about

bears, foxes, giraffes, and otters in the gay community.) Viewers might have expected a narrative about the perils of coming-out in a Catholic high school, or losing faith in organized religion after embracing a queer community, but *The Real O'Neals* offers no such message.

The show, with an emphasis on coming-out to a specifically Catholic family characterized by repression and secrecy, is based loosely on the adolescence of Dan Savage. Savage is known by most for his radical and controversial work as a sex advice columnist, as well as his *It Gets Better* Youtube campaign. Dan Savage's father was actually a Chicago homicide detective (as well as an ordained deacon), like Pat O'Neal, and his mother was a homemaker and lay minister. As Savage himself realized at a young age, in his Catholic family where people didn't talk about things, everyone was harboring guilty secrets that made his own coming-out pale in comparison, including his parents eventual divorce. In Kenny's case, this was certainly true as his parents and siblings were living their own secret lives. The representation of Catholics thus relies on stereotypes of guilt and frigidity, a lifetime of Irish goodbyes to avoid talking about personal or uncomfortable things, but also the messiness and imperfections which make them like any other family: in Kenny's own words, "just your typical all-American, Catholic, divorcing, disgraced, lawbreaking, gay family."

In yet another act of queering the norm, the series seems to cultivate this message of normalcy for conservative Catholics more than for its gay teen protagonist, echoing the "just like everybody else" rhetoric so popular in the integration of queer subcultures in American public life. This approach directly mirrors Savage's *It Gets Better* campaign, though in an unexpected way. In a Q&A session for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Savage, an award recipient, discussed how the social media campaign was, in great part, about helping LGBT youth understand that their parents will get better, and helping high schoolers and middle schoolers love and accept their parents until they do. In this way, the campaign pathologized bigoted parents and their hostile reactions, but held out hope for recovery and transformation—a complete inversion of the pray-the-

gay-away rhetoric shared by the parents in question.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, director Todd Holland described *The Real O'Neals* as “the ultimate It Gets Better brand...this show is a day-to-day revelation of It Gets Better.”<sup>70</sup>

The fact that this moral is being used to rehabilitate the image of the Catholic family, and not Kenny himself, indicates that the show presumes the normalcy of queer youth, and actively constructs a narrative in which a character like Kenny is our guide through the rituals and customs of an Irish Catholic family on mainstream television. In the episode following Kenny’s outing at the church event, he offers to help viewers understand the subtext communicated between his mother and her frenemy Marcia Worthman, using the voiceover narration to say, “let me show you some Catholic mom speak.” Subsequently, the dialogue between the competing moms is translated with subtitles which reveal their true intentions (Figure 18). In the days following Kenny’s public outing of himself, and the news of the parents’ divorce, the O’Neal front porch receives anonymous pot-roast, or “pity pork” as Eileen calls it. At the science fair, Marcia Worthman veils her pity and judgement by simply cooing, “your family’s just been through so much, did you get my ham?” Kenny translates this seemingly benign question as “your son is gay and your only self-medication is alcohol.” Eileen, sick to her stomach with the pounds of pity pork and preachy pretense calmly replies, “yes, I did, and it was delicious, thank you for your kindness.” Kenny translates his mother’s respectable retort as “I’ll tell you where I’d like to shove that ham.” Kenny, the gay teen protagonist, is our translator, implying an insider status with the audience, and the outsider, quasi foreign status of his Catholic family and church community.

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<sup>69</sup> Freedom from Religion Foundation, “Savage’s perfect Catholic family fell apart fast,” FFRF 36th annual convention award — Emperor Has No Clothes, December, 2013. <https://store.ffrf.org/legal/item/20159-savage-s-perfect-catholic-family-fell-apart-fast>

<sup>70</sup> Rob Owen, “Despite protests, the Dan Savage-influenced ‘Real O’Neals’ to debut on ABC,” *The Seattle Times*, February 29, 2016. <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/tv/real-oneals-sitcom-on-abc-a-little-less-dan-savage/>



Fig. 18: “Catholic Mom Speak.” Kenny translates “Catholic mom speak.” (left) Marcia Worthman says “your family’s just been through so much, did you get my ham?” (right) Eileen responds, “yes, I did, and it was delicious, thank you for your kindness.” Casey Johnson and David Windsor, “The Real Papaya,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Todd Holland, aired March 2, 2016

The cast of *The Real O’Neals* touched on the subversion of tolerance, which treated the conservative, homophobic forces as the subjects who needed to be handled with compassion, sympathy, patience and love until they are rehabilitated, in the TCA panel. Martha Plimpton, who plays Kenny’s mother Eileen, was quoted as saying, “(The show is) normalizing Kenny and making the fearful homophobes the weirdos, which is what I like about it.” Highlighting the importance of the medium of the family sitcom in conveying such a message, Plimpton went on to remark, “But I think it does it in a very warm and, I think, conventional way.” While it is true that the gay teen is portrayed as part of “us” in a tenuous “us-them” relationship, the series does this without disparaging Catholicism or religiosity.

While Dan Savage distanced himself from the church and his family’s faith, gaining an infamous reputation among conservative American Catholics for calling out pedophilia perpetrated by priests, Kenny O’Neal never once questions his faith. In fact, his bedroom proudly displays photos as head altar boy. While most shows about religion and homosexuality stress a rupture in

faith, self-hatred for being gay, and the rejection or casting out of the gay teen from the church, Kenny never outwardly disparages his Catholicism, or his gayness, and instead remains a weekly church goer. The positive association between Kenny's sexual orientation and his Catholic community is further bolstered by the acceptance and cooperation of St. Barklay's student body and the administration.

Despite what viewers may have expected, Kenny has no trouble starting his GSA, getting permission to take a boy to prom, and being out at school. The Vice Principal is even shown to have a small rainbow flag, next to a set of mini flags of countries in the U.N. on his desk littered with Lunchables and women's protein shakes. The only resistance comes from his mother who occasionally makes comments about his "immortal soul," but Eileen eventually defends Kenny from her own mother (whom Kenny calls the Original Catholic Gangster), telling her that if she rejects her grandson, she is not welcome in the O'Neal home. Eileen's overall reaction, based more on societal expectations than religious condemnation, further normalizes the Irish Catholic family and reveals that families like the O'Neals are just like everyone else's family, just as edgy series of the 1990s and early 2000s represented queer adolescents just like other teenagers.

This nuanced representation of the family of faith, and the series' relationship between religion and sexuality, is amplified by Kenny's conversations with Jesus. That's right, among his kitsch queer fantasies of shirtless perfume models and crossfit trainers lies a young, Birkenstock bearing Jesus (Jeremy Lawson). These dialogues range from cheesy religious puns, celebrated with fist bumps shared between the middle son of Eileen and the son of God (Figure 19), to commiserating about Eileen's austere and overzealous religiosity (Figure 20, left) to experimenting with more progressive religious spaces (Figure 20, right). Jesus appears not only for laughs, but for important moral interventions. This reminds us that for Kenny, his faith is actually a great source of support, guiding him through maternal conflicts, the trials and tribulations of high school, and

temptations of greed, selfishness and competition. Jesus appears to Kenny as he argues with his mother about bringing a date to his sister’s confirmation, and when he competes with his older brother Jimmy at the Saint Barklay’s faith retreat.



Fig. 19: “Jokes with Jesus.” Fist bump in celebration of a resurrection joke Jesus makes about a Christ confirmation piñata.

Billy Finnegan, “The Real Confirmation,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 13, directed by Todd Holland, aired February 21, 2017



Fig. 20: “Jesus is Just Alright.” (left) Jesus and Kenny lament Eileen’s insistence on making Saint Patrick’s Day all about lent.

Scott King, “The Real Lent,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Todd Holland, aired March 8, 2016

(right) Kenny, feeling guilty for “cheating” on Eileen and on their family church, is invited to a progressive Unitarian Universalist gathering where he is comforted by Jesus wearing boyfriend jeans.

Rebecca Asher, “The Real Other Woman,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 1, episode 11, directed by Kevin Biegel, aired May 10, 2016

Just as he contemplates succumbing to peer pressure, proving he can be a troublemaker by pranking his brother, saran wrapping him to a pole, Jesus appears to bring him back to the right path. In a nod to very contemporary queer iconography, Angelina Jolie as Maleficent, the hero-villain diva from the revisited tale of *Sleeping Beauty*, stands statuesquely on his left, urging him to act on his revenge fantasies (Figure 21). In the end, Kenny remembers who he really is- a rule-abiding faith leader- and abandons his vengeful plans. The scenes with Jesus are another indication of the show's playful attention to Kenny's inner life, and the humorous daydreams which help make *The Real O'Neals* a comedic sitcom. Most importantly, they also render the use of the gay teen protagonist even more radical by challenging the traditional relationship between queer subjects and Christianity.



Fig. 21: “Hero-Villain on My Shoulder.” Kenny’s internal struggle between right and wrong personified by Jesus vs. Maleficent. Lewaa Nasserdeen, “The Real Retreat,” *The Real O'Neals*, season 1, episode 10, directed by Todd Holland, aired May 3, 2016

The representation of Kenny’s spirituality may call to mind Pellegrini’s persuasive arguments for religious freedom, not as the subjugation of so-called secular culture to a monolithic conservative Christianity, but as a *pluriverse* of religious expressions. Just as, Pugh writes, “that old shibboleth of the cultural right— ‘family values’—shifts remarkably in its meaning if it is allowed to signify the multiplicity of America’s families, including its queer ones, rather than a



staid vision of the ‘right’ way to be a family,” the very concept of “religious” is transformed on *The Real O’Neals* as embodied by an eager gay catholic teenager.<sup>71</sup> The scenes with Jesus, particularly ones with references to gay pop culture, imply that Kenny’s religiosity is not separate from his queer fantasies, but part of a gay Catholic wholeness. This union of gay and Catholic identity culminates in Kenny’s romantic life as he struggles to find a boyfriend until he meets his match in the St. Barkalays’ choir. That’s right, he doesn’t find a man on Tinder or Grinder, but in the church choir! (Figure 22). Performing a mash-up of Sia’s *The Greatest* and *Oh Holy Night*, Kenny falls for Brett (Sean Grandillo from Broadway’s *Spring Awakening*) a bad boy bari-tenor from New Jersey, who occasionally cuts class and sneaks into his bedroom from the window.



Fig. 22: “The Greatest Night.” Despite competing for the solos, Kenny and Brett make eyes at each other during the Greater Chicago All Church Christmas Choir Challenge. Rob Sudduth, “The Real Christmas,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 8, directed by Rebecca Asher, aired December 13, 2016

This rather wholesome representation of a young gay relationship, adorned by red robes and rosary beads, did nothing to quell conservative backlash. Considering the prevalence of deeply negative associations between the Catholic Church, and young boys, *The Real O’Neals’* playful representation might have been seen as rehabilitative, but as we shall see in the following section, the series was targeted specifically by Catholic media watchdogs.

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<sup>71</sup> Pugh, 163-164.

## Eating Our Young: spitting out the gay teen show

*The Real O'Neals* was vulnerable from the start because the trailer signposted the mixing of Christianity, family and homosexuality. Bill Donohue and the Catholic League fought diligently to get the series canceled on grounds of anti-Catholic bigotry. Despite Dan Savage playing a minimal role, the organization used the controversial association to protest the network letting “a sick sex columnist... a filthy-mouthed anti-Catholic bigot” be a “co-producer” of the show.<sup>72</sup> Donohue claims that in the end, their letter writing campaigns were not even responsible, but rather, the show’s poor ratings led to its downfall. Sadly, after only 2 seasons and 29 episodes, the show was canceled abruptly. *The Real O'Neals*, like its predecessor *Faking It*, presents yet another example of a contemporary series marketed as an LGBT teen show with a short shelf life. While it is impossible to say what decisively ended the series, a brief investigation into some of the potential causes sheds light on the often fraught relationship between queer media and LGBTQIA+ fans, and what we can learn about representation through such findings.

Writing for *K Site TV*, Shilo Adams bemoans how queer fans are “elated with being one member of a huge ensemble cast vs. watching shows centered on their stories” or “watching an in-depth look at another gay person’s experience.”<sup>73</sup> While Adams attributes this to “internalized homophobia,” it is more likely that the preference for shows that have been queered by the *online community*, rather than presented as queer by *the networks*, has more to do with the tensions and fears of queer subcultures being so fully integrated into mainstream America and commodified for television. The departure from the margins comes with great suspicion. There is power in defying homonormativity and claiming a character, or pair, as queer despite the fact that the creators do not

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<sup>72</sup> Catholic League, “Bill Donohue Explains Why Disney/ABC’s *The Real O’Neals* is Dead,” May 15, 2017. <https://www.catholicleague.org/bill-donohue-explains-why-disneyabcs-the-real-oneals-is-dead/>

<sup>73</sup> All citations from Adams come from: Shilo Adams, “*The Real O’Neals*, Bisexuality, and Gay Representation on TV,” *K Site TV*, February 16, 2017. <http://www.ksitetv.com/the-real-oneals/the-real-oneals-sara-ramirez-bisexuality/141289/>

give them any screen time depicting queer attraction or intimacy. In other words, having the network present you with a character who is supposed to represent your community can feel like your mom setting you up on a date.

Adams describes this phenomenon of backlash against LGBT programming by queer audiences as “killing our own young.” In response to Twitter backlash over an ignorant joke made by Kenny fearing that Brett might be bisexual, Adams cautions against the “LGBTQ community (trying) to homogenize itself” by rejecting shows and characters on the basis of their politics. He cautions, “expecting every gay character on television to pop out of the closet in full Twitter activist mode is as dangerous for LGBTQ representation as the latest deeply stereotypical token gay character on TV.” Similarly, referring to critiques of *Modern Family*, Pugh warns readers, “... to seek a doctrinaire liberation for queer television characters would ironically bleach them of the individuality and quirkiness necessary for their longevity and appeal.”<sup>74</sup> However, given the scarcity of shows with queer teen protagonists, many viewers hope the representations will do their communities justice.

*The Real O'Neals'* blend of the innovative with the old fashioned translates into missed, or failed opportunities, with regard to race. While the most egregious example of this was Kenny's Beyoncé Halloween costume, which several viewers pointed out, had the white actor in black face,<sup>75</sup> the negligent treatment of race is evident throughout the development Kenny's dreary, yet occasionally sassy sidekick, Allison Wong (Ramona Young). As an Asian-American, Allison is the only recurring non-white character, and the only prominent lesbian in the series, if a wall flower can be prominent.

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<sup>74</sup> Pugh, 180.

<sup>75</sup>The author refers to “the most subtle black face I've ever seen (you can blame a heavy-handed contour stuck, or excess gilded glitter that was meant to give off that signature Beyoncé glow, but I'm not buying it).” For more, see Mikell, “The Real O'Neals' Beyonce Blackface is Inexcusable,” *Wear Your Voice*, October 31, 2016. <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/entertainment/real-oneals-beyonce-blackface>

From the beginning of the series, she is mocked by all, including her alleged best friend Kenny, for being dull, weird, and painfully awkward. In her first encounter with Kenny, as the only other student who shows up to his new Gay Straight Alliance, she quietly boasts an ability to camouflage herself and blend into her surroundings. Kenny, talking to himself, remembers that she is in the room and turns around several times but misses her since, in her earthy tones, Allison is shown literally blending into the brown walls like a chameleon.



Fig. 23: “The Chameleon.” Allison blends into her surroundings at the first GSA meeting. Casey Johnson and David Windsor, “The Real Thang,” *The Real O’Neals*, season 2, episode 1, directed by Todd Holland, aired October 11, 2016

Due to her underdevelopment as a character, Allison serves as a narrative device to depict the more traditional representation of queer teenagers and the typical story arc. She exists to teach Kenny lessons about not letting his own experiences dictate the identities and behaviors of all LGBTQ people, and as a reminder to viewers that for many, being queer is still dangerous. Despite Kenny finding external support from his family and school, Allison ultimately gets kicked out of the house when her parents spot her kissing a girl. The scene of Allison’s strict Asian parents articulating their version of “tough love,” in stark contrast to Kenny’s white mother who has the

final word on the matter, chastising the intolerant couple and temporarily adopting Allison into the O'Neal home, conveys racialized tropes about homophobia and tolerance. Wendy Peters, in her study of homophobia on adolescent programming between 2010 and 2011, analyzed *90210* (2008-2013), *Degrassi* (2010-2015), *Glee* (2009-2015) and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), and found that "With the exception of football players, these (homophobic) characters are either closeted, racialized or immigrants."<sup>76</sup> While white teens and parents were lauded for their personal growth, families of color were shown to be "outdated, intolerant and unenlightened."<sup>77</sup> Allison on *The Real O'Neals*, being denied of much character development, is reduced to the cautionary tale of parental rejection.

This disparity between Kenny's relative ease coming into his young queer self, and Allison fading into the background before being rejected by her family, touches on larger anxieties about assimilation into the mainstream, and the price of political integration. While Kenny and his white, upper-middle class family is deemed fit for consumption on the sitcom, Allison's double minority status relegates her to an antiquated narrative from previous decades of programming, and the need to be saved by a progressive, white parent. In light of the homonormative forces which shape television as a product of capitalism and mass consumption, subjects considered less palatable for the mainstream remain in the margins as white, cis, gay men get a platform in the center described by Pellegrini.

Wendy Peters similarly identifies the relationship between television narratives about so-called progress and backwards homophobia. Peters elucidates, "To consistently ascribe homophobia to marginalized minority groups, as opposed to widespread and commonsense beliefs,

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<sup>76</sup> Wendy Peters, "The Privilege of Knowing Better: Female millennial demographics and the representation of homophobia on teen TV," *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 3, no. 2 (2018): 207.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

is indefensible at best and homophobic, racist and homonationalist at worst.”<sup>78</sup> As Pellegrini describes in *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, the acceptance of certain minorities from the margins by the center does nothing to dismantle their hierarchal relationship. In many ways, Allison Wong’s story arc pays lip service to the traditional tale of familial rejection just as Amy’s mother on *Faking It* was a stand-in for conservative, Christian Texas. The incongruity of both narratives in series that depict post-gay, utopian school settings, indicate that the shows themselves are still negotiating the insider-outsider status of certain queer subjects. *The Real O’Neals*, like its predecessors, ultimately presents a complicated addition to LGBT media representation through simultaneous reliance on traditional, conventional homonormative messages, and the new and experimental queering of the sitcom as a way to challenge the assumed allegiances of the mainstream audience that can identify more with an out and proud gay teenager than his traditional religious family.

### **The Real Representation: Reflections on future studies of *The Real O’Neals***

This chapter analyzed how *The Real O’Neals* queered the American family sitcom through a gay teen narrator who made us question the position of LGBT perspectives in mainstream culture. A close viewing of the series, informed by Ann Pellegrini’s scholarship on public discourse, and Tison Pugh’s literature on gender and sexuality in American family sitcoms, illustrated the myriad of ways in which *The Real O’Neals* subverted the relationship between the margins and the center, and the traditional associations between religion and homosexuality.

Future studies of *The Real O’Neals* should look beyond the role of Kenny as the most obvious queer character, and instead provide a symptomatic reading of the series’ supporting

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

characters who are queered through their evolving understandings of intimacy and kinship. Most notable in this extended analysis might be the evolution of the O'Neal parents from an unhappy married couple, to an eager divorced pair of emotionally invested, and often possessive and jealous friends.

The queered lines between friendship and love come to a head when Eileen begins a relationship with the awkward, lanky Vice Principal Murray (Matt Oberg) who subsequently becomes Pat O'Neal's best friend. The blossoming bromance, and shaky romance, soon becomes what VP Murray refers to as a "thrupple," or a three-person couple. The three go out for drinks together and face the social ridicule of Eileen's Episcopalian nemesis who implies that their arrangement is yet another Catholic perversion. Pat and Clive (VP Murray's first name) spend copious amounts of time together looking for apartments, cycling and picnicking. The two men go ring shopping together at the mall where the shopkeeper assumes they are a gay couple. When Clive does finally propose, it is not to Eileen, but to the entire O'Neal clan, knowing full well, and desiring, that Pat continue to live in the tiny house mere yards from the family living room. To everyone's surprise, Eileen rejects the proposal, indicating once again a rejection of the normative confines of traditional marriage. Clive is happy because it is, apparently, the first time she's said "I love you" and he secretly wouldn't mind continuing to live in his condo for divorced men—a true homosocial living situation.

In the very same episode, viewers discover that Aunt Jodi (Mary Hollis Inboden), Pat's brother's ex-wife who has remained deeply entrenched in the O'Neal family, is pregnant. Shannon's plot to lock her in a room with Uncle Duane (her ex-husband) while playing *The Cranberries* worked! The marriage proposal, and unexpected pregnancy, both serve to bolster the series' message about real relationships which exist outside the binary of marriage and divorce. *The Real O'Neals* thus implies that Kenny's journey is just the tip of the iceberg, and the family's

experience getting real and honest will lead to new forms of intimacy. Future iterations of this chapter ought to explore the larger implications of queering the center through the series' treatment of the heterosexual characters.

Additionally, future studies ought to examine the implications of such outwardly supportive systems in the series which surprise viewers and make Kenny's internal struggle seem disproportionate to his lived reality. Just as *Faking It* revealed the social capital to be gained from presenting as queer in high school, the ease with which Kenny comes out in his catholic school, and the special support he receives from the Vice Principal (even before he begins dating Eileen) nearly suggest a "post-gay" culture in which young people yearn to identify with a larger political struggle, but their pronouncements in the present are merely stonewall vibrato. The timing of the sitcom, which aired before mainstream media conceived of a Trump presidency and was abruptly canceled during Trump's first months in office, may reveal the naivete of such a carefree depiction of queer adolescence. A political-historical analysis of the series may yield a better understanding of the forces which led to the series cancelation, and a deeper understanding of how *The Real O'Neals* existed alongside its contemporaries.

Despite the series cancelation, and lack of consideration among culture critics and academics, *The Real O'Neals* is an indispensable and utterly unique contribution to queer adolescent programming. The hokey yet satirical show reveals just how queer the precious American family, and the sacred sitcom, really is, delivering mawkish morals with a wink and a smile.



## **Conclusion: The Specter of Stonewall in the Post-Gay Era**

This guide analyzed several new trends in queer adolescent programming, particularly from 2013 to the present. Thematically and chronologically, this period spans the end of the gay-positive era, associated with the politics of anti-bullying campaigns, and a post-gay genre, shaped by post-marriage discourse in the U.S. While the former emphasized that queer adolescent sexuality was characterized by the coming-out process, adoption of a fixed identity, and courageously being who you were born to be in the face of bullies and bigots, the latter moved away from essentialist identity and themes of disenfranchisement. Freeform's *Pretty Little Liars* began in 2010 with a traditional narrative arc about gingerly but bravely coming-out as a fixed identity, but in the years that followed, subsequently evolved to a less conventional representation which challenged LGBT victimhood, controversially played with queer villainy, and evaded labels. MTV's *Faking It* challenged the most basic assumptions of identity and identity politics by revealing that queerness can be fabricated for social gain and still yield genuine attraction. ABC's *The Real O'Neals* questioned the marginality and innate radicality of queer adolescence through an old-fashioned style family sitcom. Each series questioned the traditional signifiers of queer adolescence while providing commentary on contemporary culture's understandings of sexuality.

This new generation of television, born after the repeal of DOMA and DADT, played with tropes of politically correct culture, often questioning the marginality and fragility of LGBT youth, while interrogating self-described progressive communities. This deviation from, or even backlash against, the gay-positive narrative of brave queer teenagers coming out despite homophobic bullies and unsupportive schools, reveals the polyvalence surrounding the discourse of sexuality. The rhetoric does not merely fluctuate between themes of pride and shame, but instead urges viewers to question the future of the "gay experience."

Given the short shelf life of *Faking It* and *The Real O'Neals*, the longevity of this era of

post-gay programming is not clear, particularly when considering critical audience reception among queer culture critics and online communities. However, even more recent examples of queer teen programming reveal similar trends of post-gay representation. The popularity and power of queer youth, typical of MTV's *Faking It*, was evident in Netflix's original mockumentary series *American Vandal*. This satire of the true crime genre, released in September 2017, was not an LGBT series by any stretch. However, in post-gay fashion, a prominent sub-plot of the second season featured an extremely wealthy, beautiful, popular queer girl. Jenna Hawthorne (Kiah Stern) is described as the student with the "most obnoxiously perfect Instagram" and a library named after her family.<sup>79</sup> As a teenage girl is interviewed, she elaborates, "Jenna's Instagram was perfect, like she was always traveling with her girlfriend taking pictures of them kissing at sunset on a yacht in Mykonos." The interview audio is overlaid with images of the Instagram account, highlighting quality photographs often taken by a professional photographer, of Jenna and her girlfriend on vacation (Figure 24).



Fig. 24: "Obnoxiously Perfect Instagram." Queer "It Girl" Jenna Hawthorne (right), known for her perfect Instagram account, pictured with her girlfriend in Mykonos. Mark Stasenکو, "Shit Talk," *American Vandal*, season 2, episode 4, directed by Tony Yacenda, aired September 14, 2018

<sup>79</sup> All quotations from *American Vandal* used in this chapter are attributed to Mark Stasenکو, "Shit Talk," *American Vandal*, season 2, episode 4, directed by Tony Yacenda, aired September 14, 2018.

While Jenna's sexual orientation is never named or discussed, as is common in post-gay programming, her Instagram post reveals many things about this particular representation of non-heterosexual adolescents. The photo credit to Jenna's "Dad (who) accidentally yet perfectly captured the happiest moment" in her life, implies that in this wealthy family, taking a same-gender significant other on vacation is perfectly normal. Similarly, the adoring comments by her peers suggest immense social capital. This theme of popularity on social media among Generation Z is the central focus of the entire second season of *American Vandal*. The mystery concludes with several characters, desperate for intimacy IRL ("in real life" in Internet slang), lured by a cat-phishing scheme and blackmailed into committing scatological crimes. Jenna Hawthorne was treated the same as the teenage boys who were manipulated by the scheme, excluding any internal commentary about her queerness. Sadly, and unexpectedly, the series was not renewed by Netflix for a third season.

In the vein of ABC's *The Real O'Neals* and the mounting nostalgia for a queer past when audiences were hungry for coming-out narratives, Netflix offered viewers *Everything Sucks!* The *Freaks and Geeks* reminiscent comedy-drama takes place in the mid-1990s in the town of Boring, Oregon. While not marketed as a specifically LGBT comedy, the series is listed under Netflix's sub-genre of Gay and Lesbian TV, and most of the plot centers around Kate Messner (Peyton Kennedy), the daughter of Boring High's principal, and the discovery of her queerness. The time period allowed the series to portray a pervasively hostile school environment in which being a "homo" or "lesbo" is considered "gross."<sup>80</sup> When students suspect Kate might be gay, they graffiti "dyke" on her locker. As she eats lunch in bathroom stall, she overhears two girls gossiping about her. One asks, "if Kate's really a lesbian does that mean she has AIDS?" The other confidently

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<sup>80</sup> All the quotations from *Everything Sucks!* in this chapter are attributed to Ben York Jones and Michael Mohan, "Maybe You're Gonna Be the One That Saves Me," season 1, episode 2, directed by Michael Mohan, released February 16, 2018

replies, “I wouldn’t even let her breathe on me.” Nostalgia for youth culture of the 1990s, the music of Oasis, Ace of Base, and Tori Amos is complicated by this reminder of in-your-face homophobia. To the disappointment of many, the series was abruptly canceled and not renewed for a second season, making *Everything Sucks!* yet another LGBT teen show that got canned this year.

Netflix’s original series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, in the vein of *Pretty Little Liars*, has portrayed sexual fluidity with an absence of labels and coming-out plots. The first season of the supernatural series, based on the Archie Horror comics, was released this October. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, starring *Mad Men*’s Kiernan Shipka, follows Sabrina Spellman’s struggle to maintain her duality as a mortal and a witch, as well as her right to free choice in the face of a patriarchal and repressive religion. Like its predecessor, *Sabrina* is not branded as an LGBT show, but includes several queer characters and themes. The sudden revelation of a character’s queer sexuality, without explanation, as described by Hogan in her analysis of *PLL*, is also prevalent in *Sabrina*. The first and most striking instance of this is when, at a funeral, Sabrina’s cousin Ambrose (Chance Perdomo) initiates conversation with Luke (Darren Mann), a handsome warlock. Luke explains that he knew the dead warlock from having gone on a few dates. Without any sign posting earlier in the series about the sexual orientation of either character, the two are subsequently shown topless in Ambrose’s bed.<sup>81</sup>

Several episodes later, the question of sexuality in the Church of the Night, the congregation of all the witches and warlocks in town, reappears to reveal fluidity and a lack of ontologized identity. As part of the Feast of Feasts ceremony, a cannibalistic ritual commemorating a founding member of the coven who sacrificed her life to feed the other witches during a particularly brutal winter, the witches and warlocks enjoy excesses in food and pleasures of the

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<sup>81</sup> Ross Maxwell, “Chapter Three: The Trial of Sabrina Spellman,” *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Rob Seidenglanz, released October 26, 2018

body. Sabrina awakes to find Ambrose and Luke in a small orgy with 3 witches and a third warlock (Figure 25). The sexuality of the characters is never discussed, save for a few passing references to the third warlock, Nicholas Scratch, as a “warlock slut” who was in a polyamorous relationship with the three witches.<sup>82</sup>



Fig. 25: “Thy Cup Runneth Over.” Ambrose (center right) and Luke (center left) pleasure the queen of the Feast of Feasts in a small orgy. Oanh Ly, “Chapter Seven: Feast of Feasts,” *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 7, directed by Viet Nguyen, released October 26, 2018

Witches and warlocks are not the only thing to haunt the citizens of Greendale. The specter of Stonewall harrows the contemporary series through a seemingly out-of-place, old fashioned bigotry. While the characters are shown to be surprisingly sexually fluid and free, a prominent subplot features the demonic possession of a bedridden, sick, gay man. Known as Uncle Jesse, the man is referred to as a “sodomite, an abomination” whose already “debased” and “corrupted”

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<sup>82</sup> Nick is referred to as a “warlock slut” by the queen bee of the Academy of Dark Arts. Donna Thorland, “Chapter Four: Witch Academy,” *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 4, directed by Rob Seidenglanz, released October 26, 2018

vessel made for an easy target.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, while Baxter High, the mortal establishment of education, hosts the subversive feminist club WICCA (Women’s Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association), it is also home to letterman adorned jocks who freely spout “dyke” and “fag” as insults. On several occasions, the jocks go after Sabrina’s androgynous friend Susie (Lachlan Watson), lifting her shirt to search for breasts. While viewers do not yet know if Susie’s character is non-binary, queer, or trans—only that she is played by a non-binary actor—most of her screen time is devoted to being bullied as a “dyke” or “boy-girl” by the jocks, and taunted by the parasitic demon who possessed her uncle Jesse for being “an abomination.”

*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is unique for its fusion of retro aesthetic (think Studebakers and rotary dials set to the backdrop of Doris Day, The Ronettes and Creedence Clearwater Revival) and hyper-modern parlance. As the “woke witch” and her sisters discuss intersectionality, Sabrina’s boyfriend Harvey suits up to work in the family mines. The superimposition of seemingly outdated homophobic language and label-free sexual fluidity neatly complements the universe’s ambiguity with regard to time period. Just as *Faking It*’s queer utopia was muddled by Amy’s pearl clutching mother, and *The Real O’Neals* normalcy of gay youth was cast in doubt following Allison Wong’s cruel treatment by her parents, *Sabrina*’s casually queer backdrop is complicated by these more traditional story lines.

As I’ve argued, *Faking It* and *The Real O’Neals* included these contradictory messages about the safety and cultural capital of LGBT teens to convey tensions over progress and power. This duality in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* may similarly reflect the cultural anxieties of this moment in history. According to creator Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the writers originally wanted to ambient *Sabrina* in the 1960s like the comics, particularly to explore social issues in the context of

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<sup>83</sup> The parasitic demon Apophis explains his selection of host to Sabrina when she confronts him. Joshua Conkel and MJ Kaufman, “Chapter Six: An Exorcism in Greendale,” *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Rachael Talalay, released October 26, 2018

civil rights. The Netflix executives pushed back and argued that 2018 is ripe enough with social issues. In an interview with *E News*, Aguirre-Sacasa explained, "Women's empowerment, women's sexuality, women controlling their own bodies... We're having these wars, all these rights are in question today, you don't need to set it in the '60s."<sup>84</sup>

For many, the unexpected presidency of Donald J. Trump revealed dueling realities in the United States. While Trump supporters celebrated taking down PC culture and rejecting the establishments of the liberal elite, his detractors were blindsided by the seeming radical departure from the era of Obama. While Obama's terms had some suggesting the arrival of a post-racial America, similar to the rhetoric of a post-gay society, the rise of Trump incited fears of white nationalism and regressive social policies towards minorities. The divergent reality of, on the one hand, a progressive, post-race, post-gender, post-sexuality America, and on the other, a hotbed of alt-right, anti-feminist, anti-SJW (Social Justice Warriors), and some white supremacist cells may feel like a time warp. This temporal contradiction is effectively represented by television which fuses the old-fashioned and the post-modern, the queer utopia and backwoods bigotry. These larger cultural anxieties over the positionality of ideas, ideology and language bleed through television, revealing an uncertainty about who we are as American spectators.

For the generation raised on TV, the future of art dedicated to the gay-experience is wide open. Generation Z's attitudes toward identity, presentation, and community may contribute to a destabilized sexual identity. Similarly, the avenues of interconnectivity through online fan communities may constitute new forms of kinship and decrease the sense of shame and isolation linked to the traditional gay experience. This insight into the attitudes of teenagers and young adults raises the possibility that one day the signifiers that have defined the queer experience on

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<sup>84</sup> Lauren Piester, "Why Chilling Adventures of Sabrina's Time Period Is So Vague," *E News*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.eonline.com/news/981198/why-chilling-adventures-of-sabrina-s-time-period-is-so-vague>

television for decades may become obsolete, only to be resurfaced by a nostalgia for the past, and fears of the nation's future. It is hard to imagine a future in which people do not have to come-out to be able to live and love freely, without any stigma or sense of marginalization from mainstream culture. The prevalence of gay shame, loss, and marginality in queer studies, as well as the focus on victimhood in the larger culture, might indicate that there is a need to maintain these themes as part of the definition of queerness. bell hooks, in her seminal essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" defines the margin as "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."<sup>85</sup> Scholars must also imagine these new worlds as new spaces for queerness that do not rely on traditional signifiers, that expand beyond identity, and redefine community. With cutting edge television shows about sexually fluid teenagers, viewers can get a glimpse at what those spaces might look like, and perhaps, in some small way, the revolution *will* be televised.

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<sup>85</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, ed. Bell hooks et al. (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 150.



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