

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

OFF THE STRAIGHT & NARROW

LESBIAN, GAYS, BISEXUALS & TELEVISION

OFF THE STRAIGHT & NARROW

Lesbian, Gays, Bisexuals & Television

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INTRODUCTION

Montage of Media clips

[Unlabeled media] *Why am I a homosexual?*

[Unlabeled media] *I'm a homosexual.*

[TV: Ellen] *I'm gay.*

[TV: The Simpsons] *You know me Marge. I like my beer cold, my TV loud, and my homosexuals flaming.*

NARRATOR: Most of us grow up not knowing any openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. But television offers us a rich panoply of characters for understanding the world. So what images of gay life does television offer? What is possible in a commercial medium that demands high audience ratings to maximize advertising revenues? This program is about how gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have been written into a straight television world, and how gay audiences have made room for themselves within it.

THE EARLY YEARS – Seen and Not Heard

NARRATOR: The 1960's were a time of political ferment. The movements for civil rights, women's liberation, and the end of the Vietnam War were profoundly disruptive to a society emerging from the seeming consensus of the late 1950's. As television scrambled to catch up with the pace of social change the growing visibility of gay rights activism could no longer be ignored.

RICHARD DYER: You begin to get representations of lesbians and gays in the cinema, really quite a lot in the sixties, but by contrast—television, still lesbians and gays were almost invisible. Towards the end of the sixties you do begin to get a few representations, but they are mainly in documentaries, mainly using a sort of medical sickness model:

[CBS Reports: The Homosexuals 1967] Homosexuality is in fact a mental illness which has reached epidemiological proportions. In 1948 Kinzey said that approximately 28% of adult males have had, at one time or another, one or more homosexual contacts.

MARGUERITE MORITZ: So I think you went from a place of invisibility to some visibility, and then the concern was, OK we're on TV but what are they saying about us on TV? What do these images convey?

LARRY GROSS: The 1967 CBS documentary really uses gay people as exhibits and the authoritative voices are those of psychiatrists, of judges, of outsiders. It also very famously shot people from behind potted plants, and you know with their faces obscured, testifying to their own sickness:

[CBS Reports: The Homosexuals 1967] I know that inside know I am sick. I am not sick just sexually I'm sick in a lot of ways. I'm immature and childlike and the sex part of it is a symptom, like a stomach is a symptom of who knows what.

EDWARD ALWOOD: Where the media have recognized gays they have recognized gay men. Where they did the very first documentary in 1967 on homosexuality they didn't include a single reference to women, they didn't include a single picture:

[CBS Reports: The Homosexuals 1967] Architects, and lawyers, doctors, teachers, business men. Men like these who lead quiet unexceptionable lives in towns...

MARGUERITE MORITZ: If you look at news media coverage men are represented about twice as often as women, and certainly I think that same kind of weighting toward gay men versus lesbians is true in both dramatic depictions and in news.

NARRATOR: On June 9th in 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village. Sick of ongoing police harassment and facing another round of arrests, drag queens, butch dykes, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals responded with force. Rioting continued for three days and the next month the Gay Liberation Front was founded.

LARRY GROSS: The lesbian and gay movement of the very late sixties and through the seventies insisted upon the importance of visibility, the importance of the media, and particularly the notion of coming out it summed up in the notion of coming out; coming out into the media, into the public. Now the results of that was that you both therefore had a very vociferous, very lively, very well organized, sometimes at any rate, movement that was putting, again in a quite systematic way, to start putting pressure on television to include us, and at the same time that of course gave great courage and (inaudible) to those actually working within the media who themselves, even if they didn't necessarily come out in a very overt way, were none the less also working a way to get lesbian and gay issues onto the agenda

CHARLES NERO: And in November of '72 there is the first so called "gay drama" on television, *That Certain Summer* in which a young boy, a teenage boy who was about my age at the time, finds out that his father was gay:

[TV: *That Certain Summer*]

This is a friend of mine, Gary McClaine.

-- Hi, how are ya? -- Hello.

LARRY GROSS: The film brought a number of important dimensions to the representation of gays that hadn't been there before. Not entirely positive. I mean there are overtones of regret, there were lines about, you know, 'I wouldn't have chosen this,' you know, this wasn't something that one would want, but on the other hand it's really not apologetic and it argues for a level of dignity that hadn't been characteristic of earlier depictions, and it's not pathetic.

NARRATOR: The 1970's saw the America Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders and anti-gay statutes were revoked in many states. A vibrant gay culture, long thriving behind closed doors made its way into the view of mainstream America.

[*The Village People 1980*]

Young men, there's no need to feel down

I said, young men, pick yourself off the ground

I said, young men, 'cause you're in a new town

There's no need to be unhappy

RICHARD DYER: During the seventies you also got the strengthening of a lesbian and gay culture in all sorts of ways, but one of the most commercially

important was the development of disco because that was both-- that became a defining aspect of-- for the music culture in general, and yet was so clearly rooted, and often overtly rooted in typically gay male culture. It both, the kind of adoration of Donna Summer, but also gay identified people like Sylvester and Village People so that they actually put an aspect of gay culture really into the mainstream, and in a way television couldn't avoid it.

NARRATOR: Disco especially made television makers realize what gay culture could offer to the mainstream. Single gay characters began to appear more frequently to spice up the everyday lives of straight television casts. But such gains in visibility did not come without cost. A conservative backlash was ignited by the threat that new gay images posed to the traditional view of America.

RICHARD DYER: And certainly there was a perception that lesbians and gays were taking over the media, taking over the world and there was inevitably because of that perception a backlash so that people began to say there's too much of all this lesbian and gay stuff on television. There shouldn't be any of it at all, and it certainly shouldn't be positive:

[CBS Reports: Gay Power, Gay Politics 1980] *For someone of my generation it sounds a bit preposterous: political power for homosexuals? But those predictions are already coming true.*

-- We are moving from gay pride to gay politics. Gay politics!

In this report we'll see how the gays of San Francisco are using the political process to further their own special interest.

LARRY GROSS: *Gay Power and Gay Politics* was aired in April of 1980 and it was probably the most consistently dishonest and manipulative piece of television documentary that I have ever seen. Having laid out the story showing you footage of people from all over the country gathering in Washington, Reisner now is saying gay power is coming and before it arrives in your neighborhood we'll show you what it really-- what it's like, what they do and then they go to San Francisco as an example they say of gay power:

[CBS Reports: Gay Power, Gay Politics 1980] *May 21, 1979. The newspapers would call it a night of gay rage.*

LARRY GROSS: At the end Reisner will say, you know, basically it's coming to your neighborhood

[CBS Reports: Gay Power, Gay Politics 1980] *The right of homosexuals to organize like any other minority seeking to further its own interest is no longer in question. The question is what will those interests be? Will they include a demand for absolute sexual freedom as they did in San Francisco, and if so will*

this challenge to traditional values provoke far more hostility and controversy when it is put to the test elsewhere?

NARRATOR: Between the late sixties and the early eighties, gay images moved from complete invisibility toward a contested presence on television. Little did people realize however that an epidemic was on the horizon, which would thrust homosexuality into the media spotlight, often with troubling consequences.

UNDER THE SKIN – The AIDS Crisis

[ABC News 1982] *Medical news of a potentially fatal disease unknown just months ago is spreading so quickly that doctors now say it's a national epidemic.*

NARRATOR: The AIDS crisis presented television with a number of challenges: How to accurately report the epidemic, how to talk about HIV transmission, and how to promote strategies to limit its spread? On all fronts television failed. Producers, always concerned about advertising revenues, worried that audiences would recoil from a discussion of gay men and sex.

EDWARD ALWOOD: Well in the beginning of the AIDS crisis the news media simply was not covering it. They did not see it as an issue that affected their audience or interested their audience, and I know of journalists that did very, very good compelling stories and could not get them printed, or certainly couldn't get them on page one and they relegated to page twenty-five or thirty-seven. There was the old thing about the three H's. It was Haitians, Haemophiliacs, and Homosexuals and that's all it affected and those were not a big audience watching television.

NARRATOR: Six thousand people had died before something dramatic forced the media to recognize the impact of AIDS.

[NBC News 1985] *The man with the most publicized case of AIDS, Rock Hudson, flew home from Paris today on a chartered 747 jet. A spokesman said...*

EDWARD ALWOOD: Rock Hudson's death marked a turning point. It drew in a large audience and the media found that people were interested in Rock Hudson's death because of his fame. And so after that we began to have quite a lot of coverage of the AIDS crisis, but it was all in terms of the epidemic. It was not about the gay community. And so everything about the gay community suddenly became an AIDS story and we were totally defined by disease.

LARRY GROSS: AIDS, inevitably I think, reinvigorated both the victim and the villain role for gay people in the media because AIDS presented gay people in the media, in the public eye as either, or both, the villains who were spreading this dreaded disease or as the victims of this dreaded disease.

There was a program called *Midnight Caller*. It revolved around a radio talk show host in San Francisco, and in one episode that got a lot of-- that drew a lot of fire the plot element here is that a former girlfriend of this lead character, of the radio host, has been infected with the HIV virus by a bisexual man who was presented as a kind of predator:

[TV: *Midnight Caller*]

He's an AIDS carrier.

-- That's not a crime Jack

I think that he is knowingly infecting people. I want to get him off the street.

LARRY GROSS: The image of the bisexual man as an AIDS spreading villain was quite common in the news media and in television in this case:

[TV: *Midnight Caller*] *Why can't you understand it's my life? It's all I have left of my life, and I am simply going to make the best of the time that I have.*

JOHN ERNI: The kinds of ideas that have been harbored in people's minds about gay people, one of the ideas anyway, was that they were promiscuous. Because they were gay and then they were promiscuous, they must therefore be guilty of having sort of brought this on themselves.

[CBS News 1984] *Bathhouses and booths in bookstores allow frequent and often anonymous sexual contact; believed to be a major factor in the spread of the disease.*

[CBS News Interview] *I don't like the fact that they got AIDS, they're spreadin' it around, they're blatant with their sex. That's what's causin' it-- that's what's causin' a lot of the spreadin' around. I don't like it.*

JOHN ERNI: A couple years after the Rock Hudson story, of course, there were several stories, big stories in the media that really gave the idea of the innocent victim faces, real people's faces, and here of course I'm thinking about the Kimberly Bergalis Story:

[The Oprah Winfrey Show 1991] *This young woman recently \$1 million, but I doubt that you'd want to trade places with her because Kimberly Bergalis won the money in a lawsuit against her dentist because Kimberly, and we now know at least two other patients all mysteriously got AIDS from this same dentist.*

JOHN ERNI: The Kimberly Bergalis story really gave us that very concrete sense about who was going to be considered innocent versus people who were active, who were doing something such as promiscuity, that had brought this to themselves and possibly to the rest of us.

[TV: 20/20 1988]

What do you think of gay people?

-- Are you serious? I think it's unreligious. I think it's wrong because if they like spread AIDS around and stuff it kills innocent people.

NARRATOR: More sympathetic portrayals of gay men with AIDS tended to be set almost exclusively in white upper-middle class families. This made it difficult to see the real diversity of people with AIDS.

CHARLES NERO: I think that when we-- that gay and lesbianism is frequently viewed as a crisis in the family, a crisis in the nuclear family:

[An Early Frost 1985]

I have AIDS.

-- That's impossible. Who told you such a thing?

The doctors did. They did tests.

-- No. AIDS is that disease that's...

I'm gay ma.

LARRY GROSS: In the case of AIDS it allows the family to reconcile as their son is dying. So it's a combination of reconciliation and a leave-taking so that you can be-- you can sort of have the touching scene of reconciliation which doesn't have to deal with the question of how the family will continue to relate to a gay child and maybe the gay child's lover or friends because, you know, he's dying. And this has recently appeared again in an even more disgusting form in the HBO movie or program *In the Gloaming* in which the gay man returns from San Francisco to his, you know, Westchester ancestral estate so that Saint Glenn Close can, you know, can take care of him as he's dying and his lover had left him, you know, and is sort of completely absent here because you're returning to the heterosexual family who will take you in.

[TV: In the Gloaming]

I miss Paul.

-- I'm sorry sweetheart.

He just didn't have the endurance.

CHARLES NERO: I find it very interesting that in the mid-eighties, when AIDS became a national issue, that one out of every four persons, out of every four men who was diagnosed as HIV positive was in the African-American and Latino community. If you had watched either film or television dramas about AIDS you would not know that.

LARRY GROSS: The initial effect of the AIDS epidemic on lesbians was to make them even more invisible. And I think the reason for that is really very simple because AIDS stories began to sort of become more prominent, certainly on the news, after 1985 and in television drama occasionally after that. Given that there is very limited willingness to deal with gay people at all, if you've done it with gay men, well we're not-- we can't do anymore, I mean we've done that.

SASHA TORRES: You know, obviously lesbians were very involved in all kinds of gay and lesbian political organizing in the eighties, but because AIDS was such a focus, not just for those political organizations but also for the media, it was very difficult to see lesbians as-- to see how fundamental lesbians were in

those movements because there was so much attention focused on gay men and AIDS.

LARRY GROSS: The story of AIDS that is never told in the media is the story of the gay community's response. It's the story of providing social services when the government wasn't doing it, of agitating for research and treatment when the government wasn't, responding of a kind of enormous grassroots response that precisely precluded this abandonment that the media insist on.

JOHN ERNI: I think *And the Band Played On* was just about the only made-for-television movie by HBO that put into the mix of the narrative the presence of the gay community and their demand for change along with the scientific community along with the community of people making policies. The candlelight march in the film reproduces the activities that happened outside of television; that people were holding protest marches and candlelight marches all over the country and the only way this gets depicted was I think in *And the Band Played On*.

NARRATOR: With a few exceptions television's reluctant tackling of the AIDS epidemic tended to reproduce conventional ways of talking about gays as isolated, as victims, or as villains. Yet, ironically AIDS forced producers to deal more consistently with gay people in both news and entertainment television.

SAINTS, SINGLES & CELIBATES – The Limits of Acceptance

NARRATOR: As AIDS increased the visibility of gay people on television, advertisers began to target the homosexual community as a profitable market. Gay television characters moved to greater visibility in TV movies, dramas, and sitcoms. The question shifted from concerns about invisibility to who gay characters were allowed to be and what they were allowed to do.

LISA HENDERSON: There is a well-established tradition using lesbian characters particularly as secondary or one-off characters, single episode characters of identifying them but then also using them to remind the audience of the heterosexuality of the regular characters. A famous example is a very sweet in many ways episode of *The Golden Girls* where the character resembles the regulars on *The Golden Girls*, and that is going to perhaps draw the audience to her, the audience who already likes those older women characters. But she must also be distinguished and so there are lots of one-liners about the ways in which she is not like them.

[TV: *The Golden Girls*]

You look great.

-- *Oh gee, you were always a terrific girl. Dorothy why can't you be more like Jean? Scratch that.*

LISA HENDERSON: So there are lots of those little zings to remind us that even though we want to receive fondly this character into this television household and by analogy into viewers' households we want to really sort of protect the borders:

[TV: *The Golden Girls*]

I like you very much Rose.

-- *I like you too Jean.*

I think you're very special.

-- *I think you're special too.*

I'm quite fond of you.

-- *I'm fond of you too.*

LISA HENDERSON: I'd say it has shifted a little bit, not just to reminding audiences of the heterosexuality of the stars but also to again, this impulse to flatter the sensibility of the audience by showing how tolerant and how open-minded the lead characters are.

RICHARD DYER: I mean one of the results then of the introduction of relatively attenuation intention positively seen lesbian and gay characters is that you tend to introduce only one so that you have a sense that they are the one character, they are introduced to represent the whole of lesbian and gay possibility. They're introduced essentially to provide a problem for straight people and for an

exploration of how straight people deal with that often benignly, liberally and so on in fact, but nonetheless what's at issue is what it poses for straight people.

JOHN ERNI: The media had never been very good at depicting gay communities period because this has been seen as a kind of sub-culture. This has been seen in many ways as a kind of fringe in our society. This has been seen as sometimes harboring some kind of an agenda that the larger society simply cannot accept.

NARRATOR: Television producers dealt with a potential threat posed by depicting gay life on TV by creating saintly gay characters who were almost too good to be true.

[TV: *Serving in Silence* 1995]

I've been looking over your record. Twenty-five years in the military, bronze star in Vietnam.

-- A lot of people went home with those.

Assistant chief nurse Army Reserves Evac Hospital, VA nurse of the Year award...

LISA HENDERSON: What you got were a lot of what I would call countertypes. We'll take all the stereotypical features that have historically been reserved for gay male characters and we'll turn them over and we'll make these into perfect people, which is not an unusual strategy for representing hither to unrepresented groups of people. In the case on *Consenting Adult* what you had was a young man who was a fabulous high school athlete, a really wonderful son, a wonderful brother, a wonderful friend at school because he had to be so good to compensate for the fact or to absorb the fact that he was going to come out in the course in this narrative:

[*Consenting Adult* 1985]

I wish there was an easier way to say this.

-- Just say it. Just say it honey, trust me.

Mom, I'm a homosexual.

LISA HENDERSON: But its message is a little creepy. Like if you're going to be gay and still expect the audience to be with you, well then you're going to have to be so All-American, so respectable by middle-class, mainstream standards so that the drama that would unfold couldn't be quite so readily attributed to psychopathology.

[*Consenting Adult* 1985]

Hey you guys. Hey take it easy.

-- C'mon we're just getting' rid of the faggots.

So get rid of me. I'm a faggot too.

NARRATOR: The creation of gay saints involved maintaining the taboo on touching. While passion and sexuality are a taken for granted part of the heterosexual television world, gay characters are presented as devoid of desire and lacking physical intimacy.

SASHA TORRES: *Heartbeats* was the first program in the U.S. to feature a lesbian as a recurrent character, and in that way it was quite ground breaking. But then on the other hand her relationship with her partner was portrayed as absolutely, scrupulously non-sexual. There was never, never a kiss, they weren't so much as shown even holding hands. So there were very strict constraints on what would be possible for this character to represent.

MARGUERITE MORITZ: The visual part carries a great deal of weight; more than you might think. So that let's take an example like the *Roseanne* episode where she kisses or is actually kissed by another woman. If you look at the dialogue, there are many racy comments.

[TV: *Roseanne* 1994] *What are you afraid we're going to embarrass you of something? I know all the etiquette. It's knives and forks on the left and vibrators on the right.*

MARGUERITE MORITZ: That was never a point of contention. The issue with that show, and the network was very reluctant to show it and Roseanne fought them on that and won that, but the issue was always whether they'd show the kiss.

LARRY GROSS: Television, even more than movies, is obsessed with the danger of showing gay people touching, so that a kiss becomes a symbolic battleground for producers and writers and studio executives to fight over, and then becomes a major public controversy – although its important to understand that these “controversies” are clearly understood to build ratings.

[Media montage of kisses]

RICHARD DYER: There's been a huge increase in representation of lesbians and gays on TV, but overwhelmingly they've been represented in terms that are unthreatening. That often means bland, and interestingly it tends to mean feminine. So it tends to mean that both gay men are represented as effeminate, but also the more feminine kind of women are represented as lesbian.

MARGUERITE MORITZ: Butch women push the gender border. Femme women are in their proper place, so that is acceptable. But butch women – they're just entering territory that is not supposed to be their domain.

NARRATOR: As a result of renewed gay activism, and marketers' recognition of gay consumers, the visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals has significantly

increased. However, the need not to alienate mainstream audiences means that gay characters are portrayed in the least threatening ways – as feminine, non-sexual, and isolated. Yet because there are so few homosexual images, gay audiences often identify with shows that include them. But what about audiences who see themselves as neither straight nor gay? What images can they identify with?

BETWIXT & BETWEEN – Representations of Bisexuality

MARGUERITE MORITZ: Bisexuality seems to be not on the radar screen at all. You're – one is either straight or gay. And that puts you in one place or another, but a very clear place.

LISA HENDERSON: Oftentimes bisexual characters – those I can think of – are young, and so the idea is their bisexuality is not, their sexuality is in a sense still fluid, and there's a lot of concern about – how can you possibly know what you are, you're fourteen years old.

[TV: Picket Fences 1993]

If you're heterosexual, that's fine. If you're homosexual, that's fine. But sometimes your emotions can fool you, and you can start to doubt what your orientation is. Now if you're in that category, if you're confused, we do want to get involved because we think we can help you.

[TV: Roseanne 1992]

Her name is Marla. I'm seeing a woman.

LISA HENDERSON: I guess Nancy, in *Roseanne*, is one example, played by Sandra Bernhard. And there was a lot of sort of comic value taken from the difference between her relationships with women and her relationships with men.

[TV: Roseanne 1994]

Nancy, how come when you date guys they look like Arnie, and when you date girls, they look like her?

LISA HENDERSON: The nature of bisexuality, I don't recall being explored. In other words, what would it mean for Nancy to be a bisexual woman involved with a male character?

[TV: Roseanne 1994]

*That guy is unbelievable! He even brings me some trashy lingerie.
-- Oh man, tacky underwear, that's so Arnie.
Ugh, he is such a pig...but it looks great on Marla!*

LISA HENDERSON: But male-female relationships when one or two partners is bisexually identified are perhaps different than male-female relationships when neither partner is. And that kind of difference, that kind of bisexual queerness, really doesn't get articulated in television so far.

JOHN ERNI: One of my other favorite bisexual moments was on *LA Law*, when Abby, who was always the floundering attorney, and CJ Lam, the British or Australian – she had this accent. So one day she kissed Abby on the lips. Abby was shocked.

[TV: LA Law 1991]

I'm not physically attracted...I like men.

-- So do I.

Oh. Then, you mean, you're...

-- Flexible?

I see.

JOHN ERNI: And of course they didn't explore that bisexuality, which was so interesting but it was just dropped later on.

[TV: My Two Loves]

And this is the first such experience you've ever had? How do you feel about it?

-- I'm not sure. Confused, I supposed because it's all so unfamiliar to me.

LISA HENDERSON: With the Marriot Hartley character in *My Two Loves*, again bisexuality was a matter of, as an adult woman, having an affair with another woman and wondering what to make of it, as someone who had been with men.

[TV: My Two Loves] *I can't describe how frightened I am by the way I feel. After all these years of being married, being a mother, leading a normal life.*

LISA HENDERSON: I think that's partly how television has addressed that; either in terms of the uncertainty of youth, or the uncertainty of newness, and a bisexuality that is not uncertain hasn't particularly found a place.

NARRATOR: Bisexuality presents a particular challenge to television producers, used to dealing with clear distinctions between straight and gay. Gay people of color also blur the boundaries of television's conventional ways of talking about sexuality.

DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY – Race & Sexuality

LISA HENDERSON: I would say that the sort of racial and ethnic diversity of lesbians and gay images on television is partly genre specific. I would like to go to daytime television and talk shows, which are certainly known for their sexual topics. And my sense is that *there*, there tends to be a greater racial and ethnic diversity than in prime time.

[TV: *Jerry Springer Show*] *My point is, how can she not know her man is gay? About two weeks ago, me, her, and her man, and friends, took a shower with her and...*

LISA HENDERSON: In prime time, whether in comedy or dramatic genres, I think it's partly with a very odd way that television tends to code diversity. They code diversity – I mean it has become a very odd notion – but they code diversity one dimension at a time. You can be a person of color among white characters, or you can be a gay person among non-gay or straight characters. But the idea of there being a broad enough range of types in a single television program or even across a series, that people can be all the things that indeed people outside of television are, there's not really a lot of latitude, not really a lot of room for that.

NARRATOR: The increase in gay images on television has meant the increase of *white* lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. So who is left out of these images? What might they have to say?

MARGUERITE MORITZ: In news, I would say, through the 1990s, gayness often means white men. And I think it takes a conscious strategy on the part of news reporters and news producers to look for diversity. I mean, people are out there, I don't think there's any question that there are people of color out there who are gay and lesbian and who have plenty to say and who want to be a part of the dialogue. But they're often not given a choice.

NARRATOR: Recent years have seen the development of more racially diverse gay roles. Which frequently offer more complex portrayals of many depictions of white gay characters.

CHARLES NERO: There's this representation of Enrique Vasquez on *My So-Called Life*, who was bi-racial – part Latino, part black – and was a 16 year old. It was really one of the first times that we had a depiction of a sensitive youth dealing with issues of his sexuality, dealing with homelessness, abandonment by the family, and bonding and creating a gay family in one episode.

[TV: *My So-Called Life 1994*]
Your address was in the phonebook. I'm sorry. It just got so hard to be alone.

[TV: MTV *The Real World* 1993-1994] *To me, confrontation is not about getting in your face. To me, confrontation is about saying “this is an issue that is important to me, and lets bring it to the table and discuss it as human beings.”*

JOHN ERNI: MTV has done a remarkably good job compared to all the other major networks. In the sense that this is just about the only place where there’s a kind of consistency in the depiction of gay and lesbian characters. Pedro Zamora, in *The Real World* gave many different aspects about this AIDS epidemic, a new face in 1993, and later on in 1994. This was a gay man with HIV. This was a gay man of color. This was a gay man who was an activist. All of these elements therefore made Pedro Zamora a completely different kind of gay image.

[TV: *Spin City* 1997]

Mike, I’d really like that answer now. Is the mayor going to come out “for” or “against” same-sex marriages?

-- Gay marriages? Oh, no, no, the Mayor’s against. I just spoke to him – he’s against it 100%.

-- The mayor’s coming out against.

Yeah, I picked that up.

-- I don’t want you to take this personally...

Oh, why would I Mike, just because if I was in a monogamous, faithful relationship with a man for ten years, I would never be allowed to marry him, but if I met some strange woman in a bar, we could be married within an hour and every state in the union would applaud it just like that.

-- You mind telling me what bar that is?

NARRATOR: *Spin City* offers us the most developed recurring gay character on television. Not only is Carter Haywood African-American *and* gay, he is also portrayed as political, and as having, if intermittently, a romantic life.

[TV: *Spin City* 1997]

I lived with a guy for two and a half years.

-- Listen, if you don’t mind me asking...

It’s exactly the same.

-- Really?

Except we get to skip the whole toilet seat argument thing.

-- Oh, well there’s a perk.

You know it. Up, down, who cares?

NARRATOR: While these portrayals of gay people of color offer us some of the most three-dimensional characters, they are still a small part of an already underrepresented group.

RICHARD DYER: So you drop these characters in, who are lesbians and gays of color, but they’re even more isolated than the white ones were. Because you

want to drop them in, but they're not that big a part of the market, so therefore you only drop them in a bit to say, well, do buy Coca-Cola, or whatever's being advertised alongside with the program. Do buy it, but we want you – lots of you white gays – you're even more important. And as for you straight, you're the most important of all, because you're *most* people.

NARRATOR: As a commercial medium, television privileges whiteness and wealth. It is not surprising then, that the most high-profile coming out of the late 1990s was by Ellen Degeneres.

ASSIMILATION & ITS DISCONTENTS – Ellen Degeneres & Andrew Cunanan

MARGUERITE MORITZ: One of the things that I think is different about today –in programming today – is that you’re seeing gay characters as regular cast members or recurring cast members. They may not be on every single episode, but they’re a presence that we come to know and expect. And that’s very different from the episodic character who just disappears after we’ve kind of used them to talk about gayness.

SASHA TORRES: If you look at the earlier sitcom representations, I’m thinking particularly of the special lesbian episodes of *Kate & Allie*, of *The Golden Girls*, of *Designing Women*, if you look at those episodes, they’re very difficult to watch as a lesbian viewer because they are entirely addressed to the heterosexual audience – they’re all about reassuring a heterosexual audience that the main characters aren’t gay.

[TV: Designing Women 1990] *No, no, no, hey – no closer. I know this is hard for you, but try and control yourself. Now I’m sorry, but I’m just going to have to let you down easy now. I like you, Virginia; I just don’t like you that way. And I’m never going to be in love with you so I hope you can accept that, pick up the shreds of your life and carry on.*

SASHA TORRES: Ellen on the other hand, is functioning in a really different way. And as a lesbian spectator, I think, there are many more opportunities for you to identify with this character and many more opportunities for you to laugh, with her, as opposed to at her.

[TV: Ellen 1997]

You’ve been living in our world, now we want to experience your world.

-- *Since when did my world become a lesbian coffee house?*

-- *Hi. I’m Jeanine.*

-- *Listen, Jeanine. Hi. I just realized I’m gay so I’m not really ready to start dating or anything.*

-- *Well, good for you. I’m your waitress.*

MARGUERITE MORITZ: I think the fact that its been so controversial, and has gotten so much attention outside the show itself – in talk shows, in news articles, on the cover of *Time* and so on. I think that is progress, just because it puts gayness on the front burner.

[TV: Ellen 1997]

You always wanted me to be open and honest with you.

-- *Oh, oh no honey, that’s what you wanted. We were always very happy keeping our feelings bottled up.*

LISA HENDERSON: Surrounding that Coming Out episode in the limitless publicity text in its many forms was this constant recuperation including by DeGeneres herself, of being a normal lesbian who is not there to sort of launch any threatening challenges. There are no raised fists of queer activism in this program.

[TV: Primetime Live Interview Ellen DeGeneres 1997] *I'm really content with exactly who I am, whether that's normal or not. This is my normal. This is normal for me.*

[TV: Ellen 1997] *I'm very interested in sleeping with you. Believe me...what's the biggest number? What, like eight hundred and something? That's how interested I am!*

NARRATOR: Ellen was one of the few gay television characters allowed to have a romantic life. Network anxiety about this has been one reason suggested for the show's cancellation.

[TV: Primetime Live Interview Ellen DeGeneres 1998] *You can't just have genuine feelings and hold someone's hand, then you get a disclaimer. But if you want to kiss a guy on the lips and wrap your leg around him, and make fun of it, we're gonna advertise the hell out of that.*

NARRATOR: A double standard was imposed on the *Ellen* show by nervous ABC executives. What was considered "adult content" on *Ellen* was mild compared with the sexual activities frequently represented on other prime time sitcoms.

[TV: Primetime Live Interview Robert Iger, President ABC Inc 1998] *I think in the spirit of absolute honesty I'd have to suggest that to some extent there is somewhat of a double standard here. Depicting characters who are gay on television in physical acts, I believe, is adult content.*

[NBC program promo] *Andrew Cunanan, the death of a suspected serial killer, re-live his final days...*

NARRATOR: Amidst the *Ellen* controversy, another news story broke that showed how superficial progress in gay representations has been. Coverage of the murder of fashion designer Gianni Versace by Andrew Cunanan resurrected the stereotype of the gay psycho killer.

LARRY GROSS: The perception of Andrew Cunanan was in many ways, a kind of backsliding. More in the sense of the people who should know better, the Tom Brokaws, the Peter Jennings, you know, referring to homosexual serial killers.

[CBS News] Police won't talk about evidence, and they won't say if Gianni Versace knew Andrew Cunanan. But Versace was gay. Cunanan reportedly moved in big money gay circles in California. While investigators don't make any connections yet, others do.

LARRY GROSS: And what that reveals I think is that progress here is relatively thin, and that when dramatic events simply overpower things, you sort of slip into default mode, into routine. And then whatever you have been educated to think about or to understand, just evaporates in the heat of the moment.

EDWARD ALWOOD: I know that the news media tended to rely on a lot of stereotypes that led them into saying things about Cunanan that just simply were not true. And one of them for instance was that he had AIDS and that AIDS had fuelled this whole thing.

[CBS News 1997] And investigators are also looking into rumors that Cunanan's rage may have been triggered after learning that he has AIDS.

EDWARD ALWOOD: It turned out later in the autopsy that he wasn't HIV-positive. He certainly didn't have AIDS, and it certainly wasn't a motivation of having AIDS but the old stereotype that a gay person is out of control or they've got a disease that will make them do things that are just insane, was the type of stereotype that is throughout our society, has often been attached to our subculture, and the Cunanan incident dredged it all up again.

NARRATOR: Prime time images of gays have been at the center of most controversy. Yet lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences have found in sometimes the most unexpected places, images of their lives, which offer a vital form of validation and pleasure.

VITAL SIGNS – Gay Images, Queer Readings

NARRATOR: Young gay people grow up in enemy territory, indeed their immediate families may be the most hostile to their sexuality. Gay youth are three times as likely to commit suicide than their straight peers, and often suffer isolation and harassment. Television images offer a crucial lifeline for people craving to know that there are others in the world like themselves.

[TV: *One Life to Live* 1992]

Well, I'm not afraid – not anymore. Because I know who I am, and I can finally live. I'm Billy Douglas, and I'm gay.

-- No! You shut up! You shut up!

LARRY GROSS: When *One Life to Live* told the story of Billy Douglas over the summer of 1992, the actor Ryan Phillippe, who was playing this gay teenager, got several thousand letters – young soap opera actors get lots of letters – what's not typical is the literally scores of letters from gay men, many of them young gay men (some of them older), and many of them saying "you're the first person I've ever told that I'm gay." Revealing in often heartbreaking language their sort of need to connect to somebody, to talk to somebody.

[TV: *Primetime Live Interview Ellen DeGeneres* 1998] *I would just like to thank you again for giving me the courage to be true to myself and letting me realize that I'm not a nasty, sick person. I told my parents...*

...When I was in high school, I would get teased and threatened on a daily basis. Throughout my four years in hell, I was known as dyke, queer...

...The courage and pride in myself that I have found from watching you is so wonderful to feel for the first time in my life.

RICHARD DYER: I think there's a sense in which straight people often perceive two or three images as sort of screaming from the rooftops, making a tremendous fuss about it. So that even when now you have an even greater number of images on television, it still is actually a tiny, tiny proportion of the number of images of people on television.

EDWARD ALWOOD: Our community has a lot working against it, in terms of coverage, because so many people are ready to call and complain about the stories that are run about us. And so few of us are willing to write letters or make telephone calls urging the media to cover us more and to cover us the way we should be covered truthfully and accurately and those types of things. The news media have more contacts within the gay community than they have ever had, so it makes it a lot easier on a news reporter, when they have a story that involves gays and lesbians to be able to pick up a telephone and call an organization or call an individual to be able to ask them questions and to have people who are willing to go on television or be in an interview. And that's fairly new.

NARRATOR: Fiction and news programs are not the only places where gay images exist. Other genres, such as music videos, cartoons, and sports, can offer more open spaces for different kinds of sexual identification.

[TV: Tracy Chapman Music Video]

RICHARD DYER: The whole area of music, particularly of MTV, is very important. If you think of people like Melissa Etheridge, k.d. lang, Madonna – the way in which they've been willing to take on lesbian imagery is very much to be cherished I think.

[TV: Pet Shop Boys Music Video]

[TV: South Park 1998]

What the hell are you doing Cartman?

-- My mom said if you wanted to become a lesbian, you have to lick carpet!

RICHARD DYER: Particularly it's striking that animated series are actually able to get away with a great deal more than series using live actors. *Because* they are in a certain sense, seen as not real, and therefore more outrageous. And programs like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, in all sorts of ways, been very transgressive and very daring, and that includes being daring about lesbians and gay men.

[TV: Simpsons 1997]

Hot stuff, coming through.

-- Dad, why did you bring me to a gay steel mill?

-- I don't know...this is a nightmare! You're all sick!

Oh, be nice!

-- Oh, my son doesn't stand a chance – the whole world's gone gay!

Ohmigod, what's happening now?

We work hard, we play hard. (dance music)

[TV ad: Olivia Cruises 1997]

NARRATOR: Occasional images of gay consumers can also be found in commercials.

[TV ad: Volkswagen 1997]

NARRATOR: Some ads are carefully coded to suggest a gay theme to gay audiences, while remaining innocuous to heterosexual viewers.

LISA HENDERSON: When we think about images of gay people, lesbians, particularly gay and lesbians, thinking more than also bisexual people, transgendered people – I think we usually think about news programming, we

usually think about prime time drama and sitcoms and we think about daytime talk shows. And those are the genres that are kind of our default genres when the phrase “images of gays in TV” comes up. And a really rich part of the television schedule that is not part of that default is sport. And its certainly not news to queer-identified audiences that sport is a place that you can go and you don’t always even have to be a sports fan. I know a lot of lesbian women who are very devoted watchers of the WNBA, knowing zip about basketball – you know they don’t come to this with a lifetime of basketball devotion (although some do) but some don’t, and are learning about basketball because of their attraction to this generous butch aesthetic.

NARRATOR: Lesbians, gays and bisexuals can make television relevant then, even in the absence of explicit images. Gay audiences have long been casting an ironic eye over the sexual stereotypes of mainstream television, and have been re-reading same-sex friendships as romantic involvements. Such strategies can continue to offer a place for identification in a medium, which still minimizes gay experience and culture.

[TV: Xena, Warrior Princess 1998]

My God.

-- What is it?

You are beautiful!

CHARLES NERO: I remember one time, I went to Atlanta and I went to a black gay bar, I think it was called Fosters. And it was Thursday night, and the place was packed. The reason? Diahann Carroll, Dynasty. And everybody was talking about “oh that Diahann Carroll is Dominique Devereaux, TV’s first black bitch.” And clearly, gay men took particular pleasure and delight and I think many black audiences took pleasure and delight in Diahann Carroll’s performance as Dominique Devereaux.

LISA HENDERSON: The eighties was the era of *Cagney and Lacey* and as there emerged *Ellen* episodes and *Ellen* bar nights, there were *Cagney and Lacey* nights in lesbian households, and it took very little imagination with an audience who presumed that the characters were indeed romantically involved – whatever the actors or producers may have intended – to reread those knowing glances between the Cagney character and the Lacey character.

But it would be a real mistake I think for gay people to over-invest in the commercial mainstream, particularly of television, for social transformation. New programs, new strategies should be tried there, and accomplishments should be lauded and old messages that are painful should be challenged. But so should gay and lesbian independent production be supported, so

should we look there for images that are not only images *of* us, but also images *by* us, and images *for* us that are not constantly looking to negotiate this commercial line and constantly looking to reconcile a non-gay audience.

RICHARD DYER: The main change from the sixties to the eighties and nineties is simply that there are more representations and that on the whole they are more positive. Its gone perhaps as far as it can in the model of “well, we’ll tolerate it and even be quite nice about it,” but it still hasn’t yet taken on board that there are implications in that for what heterosexuality is, for what gender is, for what race is, for instance. So once you *really* take on board lesbians and gays, once you really integrate it into your vision of the world, its no longer containable as this thing you’re nice about, it actually has implications for really transforming how we understand what it is to be a human being.

NARRATOR: By the late 1990s, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are no longer invisible on television. But gay characters are still expected to exist in a straight world, as a foil for others’ anxiety, sympathy or humor. Few shows are willing to consider the real challenge gay perspectives pose to the mainstream, to questions of identity, gender, and sexuality as well as to conventional family life. To include the broad range of lesbian, gay, and bisexual experience, would demand that television expand its range of who it validates as fully human.