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The State of Media Ownership and Media Markets

Competition or Concentration and Why Should We Care?

Dwayne Winseck

The 500-Channel Universe and Marketplace Democracy

In the eyes of many, the emergence of new television networks and the explosive growth of cable and satellite channels—MTV, HBO, ESPN, CNN, Fox News and Canal1, A&E, Al-Jazeera, to name just a few—offers an unprecedented abundance of choice. The 500-channel universe is, if not already here, just around the corner. Even the half-dozen major Hollywood Studios—Columbia, Disney, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Pictures and Warner Bros—appear to be losing their iron-clad grip over American and international film audiences, with their share of the US market tumbling from 85% in 1994 to just over 66% in 2004. Throw into this mix the explosive growth of the Internet, with its endless well of web pages, news sources, music and video downloading services, and the free-wheeling commentary of innumerable blogs, and the idea of concentrated media markets sounds anachronistic. Many believe that new technologies have rendered limits on media concentration obsolete. . . . As media economist Compaine (2001) states, ‘the democracy of the marketplace may be flawed but it is . . . getting better, not worse.’

Most scholars agree that there is a wider range of media available to a greater number of people than in the past. However, some also claim that media markets are becoming more concentrated. . . .

While the size of the global media market in 2005 was a staggering \$258 billion and consists of hundreds of firms, the ‘big 10’ global media firms account for just over 80% of all revenues. The ‘big 10,’ ranked by revenues, are listed in Table 1.

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Table 1 Top 10 Global Media Companies (by Revenue)

	Firm	Revenue (billion USD)	Ownership	National Base
1.	Time Warner	\$43.7	Diversified	USA
2.	Disney	\$31.9	Diversified	USA
3.	Bertelsmann	\$28.9	Bertelsmann/Mohn	Germany
4.	News Corp	\$25.3	Murdoch and others	USA
5.	Viacom	\$24.1	Redstone family	USA
6.	Comcast	\$22.7	Roberts family	USA
7.	NBC/Universal	\$14.0	Diversified	USA
8.	Pearson	\$7.5	Diversified	UK
9.	Fuji TV Network	\$5.0	Unclear	Japan
10.	ITV	\$3.9	Diversified	UK

This evidence suggests that markets are becoming more consolidated. The top 10 global media companies are also among the largest corporations in the world, with 7 of the top 10 listed on *Fortune* (2006) magazine's list of the global 500. They are also all media conglomerates, meaning that they operate across many different media markets, including television, film, newspapers, publishing and the Internet, where their websites are now among some of the most visited sites worldwide. There is also a surprising number of 'owner-controlled' companies among the big 10: Bertelsmann, News Corp, Viacom and Comcast. In terms of revenue, these multimedia firms dwarf their smaller regional and national counterparts, many of whom operate in only one or two media sectors. The big 10 are also solidly based in the USA (6), Britain (2), Germany (1) and Japan (1). In addition, while boasting of reaching hundreds of millions of homes across the world through channels such as MTV, A&E, Showtime,

FoxNews, CNN, Canal+ and so forth, these firms derive the lion's share of their revenues from their home markets and then from Europe, North America and Japan. Only a fraction of their revenues comes from the rest of the world.¹

Mediasaurus: Mapping the Terrain

Recent media mergers and acquisitions are notable in terms of their *sheer size*. This is perhaps best illustrated by the unprecedented, but ill-fated, AOL and Time Warner deal, initially valued at \$166 billion in 2000 but that fell to \$106 billion a year later, and even less since. A few transactions have also been *transnational in scope*, such as the purchase of Universal Studios by the French diversified conglomerate, Vivendi, in 2000 (\$35 billion), although the failure of that deal spawned yet another round of consolidation

when GE/NBC acquired Universal Studios in 2004. The current wave of consolidation has also resulted in unprecedented common ownership and vertical integration between the major US television networks and Hollywood studios: Twentieth Century Fox and the Fox Network (1985), Disney with ABC (1995), Time Warner and the WB Network (1995), CBS and Viacom (1999) and NBC/Universal (2004). These alignments fundamentally distinguish the state of the US media today from any other time in US media history (Kunz 2007). The acquisition of independent firms, such as Disney and Viacom's purchase of Miramax and DreamWorks, respectively, in 2005 also undercut the influence of independents that had been seriously chipping away at Hollywood's dominance of USA and international film markets over the past two decades.

Vertical integration across the supply and distribution of film and television programs has three effects. First, it gives Hollywood studios secure access to more distribution outlets, through conventional and satellite and cable television channels. Television networks, in return, gain access to a steady source of film and television programs. Whereas the big three networks obtained most of their programming from outside sources and the rest 'in-house' in the 1980s, today nearly 80% of new series are acquired in-house. Second, locking up access to both of these critical resources—content and distribution—helps media firms manage the inherently risky nature of the media business. Third, however, this hold over content and distribution creates a significant barrier for independents and rivals, and, thus, limits creativity and the diversity of the marketplace for cultural commodities (Croteau and Hoynes 2006, 91).

Media firms . . . have a history of using deep pockets and litigation to reduce the threat of new technologies, from the buying up of competing patents in the early days of radio and film to recent lawsuits

against new music and video downloading services. While this continues to be the case, they are also using acquisitions and alliances to ensure that new technologies offer more opportunities than threats. The annual reports of the major global media conglomerates reveals the shift, notably with News Corp's purchase of the social networking site MySpace (\$580 billion), gaming and entertainment site IGN.com (\$620 million) and the top sports site in the USA, Scout Media (\$60 million) in 2005. Similarly, ITV acquired the eighth-ranked site in Britain, Friends Reunited (\$200 million) in 2005, while Viacom bought Neopets (\$160 million), a children's website in the USA, and IFilm.com in 2004 and 2005, respectively. The global media firms have also forged alliances with cellular telephone companies and computer firms such as Apple and Microsoft to stake out a key role in new mobile television, music and film download services. While the largest such deal in the post-dot.com bubble era occurred in 2006 when Google took over the video-sharing site, YouTube (\$1.65 billion), that transaction was preceded by agreements with NBC Universal, Sony BMG, Time Warner, Viacom and News Corp that aimed to achieve three goals: first, to implement content identification technology that helps these companies maximize control over their content; second, to share traffic and advertising revenue; and third, to share access to Google's technology among these groups.²

These agreements will not allow these firms to obtain 'perfect control' over their content. However, they will help to insure that Google and emerging services do not dislodge the largest global media conglomerates from their dominant position in the media economy. These arrangements also give 'old' media firms a strong hand in shaping the evolution of new technologies. Those who believe that new technologies are inherently antagonistic to concentrations of economic, political and cultural power ignore these points. The Internet is

not immune from these tendencies and this can be seen in Google's overwhelming dominance of the search engine market (56%), with the next three companies—Yahoo!, MSN and Time Warner/AOL—accounting for roughly 35%, yielding a concentration ratio of over 91%. . . . It is this reality that has allowed Google to become such a powerful nexus in the unfolding relationship between the 'old' and 'new' media, a phenomenon that we might call a 'Googlopoly.'

The staying power of the global media giants can be seen in the fact that Time Warner, Disney and NBC possess four out of the top 10 Internet news sites in the USA, while the *New York Times*, *Tribune* newspapers, *Knight Ridder* and *USA Today* take up another four. The fact that the remaining leading news sites rely on these sources as well as a few global news agencies for most of their news content further magnifies this influence. Indeed, producing almost no original news of their own, Yahoo! and Google do little to diversify the range of available news sources. These patterns are also true globally, where the same firms dominate, with the exception of the BBC and three Chinese sites, the latter of which all rely solely on reports from the state-controlled Chinese media (Comscore 2006; Paterson 2005, 157–60).

Explaining the Consequences of Media Concentration

What are the consequences of this growing consolidation? Many critics argue that the most significant consequence lies in the ability of a handful of media owners to exert influence on media content and, thus, people's view of the world. This is a crucial issue, but it is also one that is fraught with difficulties and also, I believe, rather like trying to draw a camel through the eye of a needle. One of the difficulties with measuring

the impact of media ownership on content stems from the changing organizational structure of large media conglomerates. Demers and Merskin (2000) make this point when they argue that the potential for media owners to influence content has been sharply diminished by the rise of the modern corporation. Under these conditions, ownership is usually widely dispersed, with actual control resting in the hands of expert managers, with media workers relatively free to do as they please within the limits of professional standards and good business practice. In general, this claim has merit and mirrors trends in the growth of publicly traded media conglomerates. . . . Nonetheless, it is important to note that four of the top-10 global media firms—News Corp (Rupert Murdoch), Bertelsmann (heirs to founder, Carl Bertelsmann), Viacom (Sumner Redstone) and Comcast (Roberts family)—are still owner controlled. In Canada, 11 of the top 12 firms are still owner controlled. The phenomenon is also prominent . . . throughout Latin America and Australia, among other places. In short, it is far too early to sound the death knell of media moguls who have the potential to use their outlets to pursue political and ideological objectives. However, discovering the direct links between owners, content and people's beliefs is fraught with difficulties, including the anecdotal nature of the evidence and the well-known limits of media effects research.

A larger view of the issues considers the consequences of consolidation on the allocation of resources within media firms. While some believe that the deeper pockets of media conglomerates allows them to commit more resources to production, news gathering and so forth, a counterargument is that resources are being diverted from these goals to meet the high cost of financing mergers and acquisitions. . . . As an example of this, NBC recently announced that it is cutting its workforce by 700 people, eliminating news bureaus in favour of a centralized operation in New York to feed the NBC network, MSNBC,

CNBC and its Spanish-language network, Telemundo, and replacing high-cost dramatic programs in early prime time with cheaper 'reality-TV' series and game shows. Overall, the number of television network journalists has fallen by over one third since 1985 in the USA, while international news bureaus have been slashed (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2006). . . .

The magnitude of such changes differs between media firms, but the trend is toward fully integrated news operations that serve multiple channels, budget cuts, smaller journalistic staffs, fewer foreign bureaus and the replacement of high-cost dramatic programs with a smaller number of 'blockbusters' and more low-budget shows.

Media Concentration: Some Concluding Thoughts

These trends are bound by audience tastes and the complexity of the media business, but several points remain to be made in any final assessment of the consolidation of media markets. First, audiences now have more media channels than ever, but source diversity is shrinking. Second, media professionals are experiencing vast changes in the quantity and quality of work available to them and this has created deep rifts within the media. Media workers in the USA, Canada, Britain and many other countries report that bottom-line pressures now have a greater impact on their work than in the past, that the influence of owners, managers and advertisers is increasing and that their trust in media executives is declining (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2006). Lastly, the structure and feel of the media is being subtly altered as media organizations strive to maximize control over their content through aggressive litigation, pressuring legislatures to expand the scope and duration of copyright

laws and implement digital rights management technologies that increase audience surveillance and set limits around what people can and cannot do with the new media. The upshot of these changes is a subtle shift in the architecture of the media in favour of closure and control versus the values of openness and real diversity that are the *sine qua non* of democratic societies. For all these reasons, media ownership and concentration remains an absolutely critical issue, with not only concerns of bias and the abuse of personalized power at stake, but the future of media evolution and potential of democracy itself.

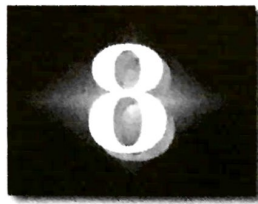
Notes

1. These observations are based on data from the *Annual Reports* published by each of the media companies referred to here.

2. The following paragraph is drawn from information contained in each of the 'big 10' global media firms' annual reports for 2005 and 2006.

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Hetero Barbie?

Mary F. Rogers

most hetero females put boy at center of their lives.
popularity hinges on attractiveness to boys.

As they enter their teenage years, if not before, most heterosexual females begin putting a boy or young man at the center of their lives. Moving through puberty toward adulthood, girls and young women find that their popularity at school, their feminine credibility, and much else hinge on their attractiveness to boys and their relationship with one particular boy.¹ As they get heterosexualized, then, girls and young women face pressures to give boys and dating a lot of priority. In turn, they pay increasing attention to the size and shape of their bodies, the range and contents of their wardrobes, the styling of their hair, and the making up of their faces. Barbie epitomizes, even exaggerates, these families mandates. She gives girls endless opportunities to costume her, brush and style her hair, and position her in settings like aerobics class, a school dance, or the shopping mall.

Yet Barbie escapes the typical outcomes of such activities. In the end she seems not to have her heart in her relationship with Ken, who in no way monopolizes her attention. Barbie exudes an independence that deviates from the codes of mainstream femininity. That she is insistently single and perpetually childless means that hers is no "normal" femininity. Again, one comes up short by looking for an explanation in Barbie's teenage status, for she is no teenager when it comes to occupations, travel, and other aspects of her lifestyle. The facts of Barbie's having neither a husband nor a child do not speak for themselves, then. Instead, these circumstances leave Barbie open to multiple, conflicting interpretations. They enlarge this icon's field of meanings and thus the range of consumers she can attract.

Within that field of cultural meanings stands the possibility that Barbie may not be heterosexual. Indeed, she may not even be a woman. Barbie may be a drag queen. Much in the tradition made widely visible by stars like RuPaul, Barbie may be the ultrafeminine presence that drag queens personify. Her long, long legs and flat hips suggest this possibility. So does her wardrobe, especially her shimmering evening gowns, high heels, heavy-handed makeup, and brilliant tiaras and other headpieces. Barbie's is a bright, glittery femininity never visibly defiled by a Lady Schick or Kotex. This exceptionally, emphatically feminine icon has some appeal among gay men.

Ken not at center of Barbie
Barbie exudes independence

From *Barbie Culture*, by Mary F. Rogers, 1999, London: Sage Publications Ltd. Copyright © 1999. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd.

Barbie is open to interpretation
not necessarily hetero
+ no need for ken + independent
+ Ken not at center

Barbie's world allows for non-straight readings

That appeal shows up in diverse ways. I have no interest in whether or not this designer or that, this collector or that, this event or that is gay, however. My concern is with the gay-themed character of what one comes across in some corners of Barbie's far-reaching world. In many cultural worlds heterocentrism and heterosexism prevail in no uncertain terms. In the world of "Father Knows Best" or the feminine mystique, attention to gender and family center on heterosexuality strongly enough to snuff out alternative readings whereby "transgressive" sexualities such as lesbianism or bisexuality can enter the picture. Commonly intertwined with such heterocentrism are values celebrating heterosexuality as normal and natural while condemning or at least rejecting lesbigay sexualities. The world of Barbie is relatively free of such heterocentrism and heterosexism and thus holds relative appeal for nonheterosexual people, especially gay men. Lesbians, particularly those inclined toward feminism, are more likely to reject some of the central features of Barbie's world, as are bisexuals who might find her apparent monosexuality unappealing. In any case, Barbie's world allows for nonstraight readings, just as many other "straight" cultural products do.² I tap such possibilities here by treating Barbie's sexual identity as less than certain while arguing that her sweeping appeal revolves around such ambiguities.

As an icon of drag, Barbie illustrates what feminists and culture critics have been saying for some years. In no uncertain terms Barbie demonstrates that femininity is a manufactured reality. It entails a lot of artifice, a lot of clothes, a lot of props such as cuddly poodles and shopping bags, and a lot of effort, however satisfying at times.³ If Barbie can join drag queens as an exemplar of the constructed character of femininity, she can also be an icon of nonheterosexual femininity. In the extreme Barbie might be a lipstick lesbian, a lesbian fem, or a lesbian closeted more tightly than most who choose not to "come out." She might be a bisexual

woman who once cared about and pursued a relationship with Ken but now prefers her "best friend" Midge. Most radically of all, Barbie might be asexual. She might be sexy without being sexual, attractive without being attracted. . .

Not surprisingly, RuPaul sometimes shows up in Barbie's world. Scott Arend (1995) reports that Ivan Burton, who designs artist dolls, has done a "one-of-a-kind RuPaul." Jim Washburn (1994) says that Michael Osborne, a Barbie doll collector, wants to be buried with what he calls his "RuPaul Barbie, or Ru-Barbie for short." Osborne's favorite doll is made from a My Size Barbie, the 18-inch version of the doll, and has "brown skin, blue eyes and platinum hair." ^{gay reading of straight text involves little stretch}

The feature story on Osborne, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, illustrates how a gay-themed text fits into a mainstream publication, that is, how a gay reading of a supposedly straight text involves little stretch of the nonheterosexual imagination. Twenty-four-year-old Osborne, who has been collecting Barbie dolls since he was thirteen, has nearly 300 of them and makes no attempt to hide his "love" for them. Osborne says he has friends employed by Mattel who help him acquire some of his more unusual dolls, such as a hairless Skipper, Barbie's little sister. Like other collectors, Osborne keeps a lot of his dolls in their original packaging. (NRFB, or Never Removed From Box, enhances the market value of a doll.) Osborne, however, has "play-with dolls, whose outfits he changes monthly." He also shampoos his dolls' hair and gives them permanents. Also, Osborne once dressed as Barbie at Halloween and claims to have "looked pretty darn snappy." Asked about the possibility that his sizable Barbie collection could be an obstacle to "finding a mate," Osborne responds in terms of "friends who have had rocky relationships with people because they did not really like Barbie." Washburn poses the more difficult question: What "if it came down to a

Barbie's world allows for non-straight readings -

(*) Barbie's appeal revolves around ambiguous sexual identity.

Little stretch.

choice between giving up the Barbies or the person?" Osborne answers, "It depends on the person, but probably the person."

Where a heterocentrist text would talk about finding a wife or a woman, this one refers only to mates and people and persons. In view of its subject matter this text readily passes as gay-themed. Along those lines Osborne reports, "I had always liked fashion, always liked doing hair. When people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said I wanted to be a hairdresser and president of Mattel." Osborne's interest in being a hairdresser expresses an interest in what queer theorists, who theorize about nonheterosexual or "transgressive" sexualities, call non-normative occupations. Such lines of work are those that attract disproportionate numbers of lesbigay people and are widely considered inappropriate for people of a given gender. The ballet and hairdressing for men and the military and auto mechanics for women are examples. In any event Osborne's interest in a non-normative occupation bespeaks a gay-themed text, as does his claim that "the best times of his life have been Barbie times." . . .

More generally, *Barbie Bazaar* often offers gay-themed fare for those attuned to it. Like most such material, it does not leap out to most readers as lesbigay even while leaving room for "queer" interpretations. . . . Often, too, gay-themed material shows up in comments about or articles on doll artists, most of whom appear to be men often working in conjunction with male "partners" to refashion Barbie in designs of their own. In one *Barbie Bazaar* article Pattie Jones (1995), for instance, mentions Jim Faraone, who once designed jewelry for Anne Klein but now "designs hand-beaded Barbie doll outfits." Faraone began collecting in 1986 and now has a thousand Barbie dolls. Two of his artist dolls are pictured in Janine Fennick's *The Collectible Barbie Doll* (1996). One is AIDS Awareness Barbie where the AIDS-awareness red ribbon runs around the

back of Barbie's neck, across her breasts, and then crosses at her waist. Also showing up in *Barbie Bazaar* are references to Mattel's participation with collectors and other Barbie fans in AIDS fundraisers, often targeting children with AIDS as beneficiaries. . . .

Barbie thus points to what Jesse Berrett (1996) sees as "mass culture's power to define, commodify, and mutate sexual identity." Put more queerly in terms used in *Out* magazine:

RuPaul's larger-than-life, gayer-than-gay presence on runways, VH1, and New York radio and everywhere else . . . suggests that the mall of America has embraced him not as a novelty but as a genuine homo star. But it doesn't take a drag queen to have an impact. (1997: 96)

Mattel can unintentionally sponsor the same impact, it seems. . . .

Notes

1. For insights into this state of affairs, see Eder with Evans and Parker (1995), Fine (1992), and Walkerdine (1990).

2. See, for example, Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)Articulation of *Black Widow*," in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (eds.), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York, Routledge, 1991), pp. 304-9; Bonnie Zimmerman, "Seeing, Reading, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature," in Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (eds.), *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991), pp. 92-7.

3. Dorothy E. Smith is one of the best commentators on how pleasurable some of the projects of femininity can be. She talks, for example, about the pleasures of female community built up around such feminine pastimes as clothes shopping. See *Texts, Facts,*

Does not leap out as lesbigay even while leaving room for queer interpretations.

10

The Whites of Their Eyes

Racist Ideologies and the Media

Stuart Hall

media's main sphere of operation is the production and transformation of ideologies.

We begin by defining some of the terms of the argument. 'Racism and the media' touches directly the problem of *ideology*, since the media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies. . . .

I am using the term ideology to refer to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence. Language and ideology are not the same—since the same linguistic term ('democracy' for example, or 'freedom') can be deployed within different ideological discourses. But language, broadly conceived, is by definition the principal medium in which we find different ideological discourses elaborated.

Three important things need to be said about ideology in order to make what follows intelligible. First, ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings. In liberal ideology, 'freedom' is connected (articulated) with individualism and the free market; in socialist ideology, 'freedom' is a collective condition, dependent on, not counterposed to, 'equality of condition,' as it is in liberal ideology. The same concept is differently positioned within the logic of different ideological discourses. One of the ways in which ideological struggle takes place and ideologies are transformed is by articulating the elements differently, thereby producing a different meaning: breaking the chain in which they are currently fixed (e.g. 'democratic' = the 'Free West') and establishing a new articulation (e.g. 'democratic' = deepening the democratic content of political life). This 'breaking of the chain' is not, of course, confined to the head: it takes place through social practice and political struggle.

Second, ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions *within ideology*. They pre-date individuals, and form part of the determinate social formations and

Extract from *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties* (George Bridges and Ros Brunt, eds.), Lawrence & Wishart, 1981, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," by Stuart Hall, pp. 31–32, 34–35, 36–37, and 29–41.

conditions into which individuals are born. We have to 'speak through' the ideologies which are active in our society and which provide us with the means of 'making sense' of social relations and our place in them. The transformation of ideologies is thus a collective process and practice, not an individual one. Largely, the processes work unconsciously, rather than by conscious intention. Ideologies produce different forms of social consciousness, rather than being produced by them. They work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premisses; when our formations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can 'take-for-granted.' 'Little boys like playing rough games; little girls, however, are full of sugar and spice' is predicated on a whole set of ideological premisses, though it seems to be an aphorism which is grounded, not in how masculinity and femininity have been historically and culturally constructed in society, but in Nature itself. Ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted 'naturalized' world of common sense. Since (like gender) race appears to be 'given' by Nature, racism is one of the most profoundly 'naturalized' of existing ideologies.

Third, ideologies 'work' by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to 'utter' ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors. This is not because they emanate from our innermost, authentic and unified experience, but because we find ourselves mirrored in the positions at the centre of the discourses from which the statements we formulate 'make sense.' Thus the same 'subjects' (e.g. economic classes or ethnic groups) can be differently constructed in different ideologies. . . .

Let us look, then, a little more closely at the apparatuses which generate and circulate ideologies. In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the

production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies. Ideologies are of course, worked on in many places in society, and not only in the head. The fact of unemployment is, among other things, an extremely effective ideological instrument for converting or constraining workers to moderate their wage claims. But institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production. What they 'produce' is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work. And, amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race.

The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated. We have said 'ideas' and 'ideologies' in the plural. For it would be wrong and misleading to see the media as uniformly and conspiratorially harnessed to a single, racist conception of the world. Liberal and humane ideas about 'good relations' between the races, based on open-mindedness and tolerance, operate inside the world of the media. . . .

It would be simple and convenient if all the media were simply the ventriloquists of a unified and racist 'ruling class' conception of the world. But neither a unifiedly conspiratorial media nor indeed a unified racist 'ruling class' exists in anything like that simple way. I don't insist on complexity for its own sake. But if critics of the media subscribe to too simple or reductive a view of their operations, this inevitably lacks credibility and weakens the case they are making because the theories and critiques don't square with reality. . . .

Another important distinction is between what we might call 'overt' racism media is complex not unifiedly conspiratorial.

mpt
example

overt vs. inferential racism

and 'inferential' racism. By overt racism, I mean those many occasions when open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view.

By inferential racism I mean those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional,' which have racist premisses and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded. . . .

An example of inferential racist ideology is the sort of television programme which deals with some 'problem' in race relations. It is probably made by a good and honest liberal broadcaster, who hopes to do some good in the world for 'race relations' and who maintains a scrupulous balance and neutrality when questioning people interviewed for the programme. The programme will end with a homily on how, if only the 'extremists' on either side would go away, 'normal blacks and whites' would be better able to get on with learning to live in harmony together. Yet every word and image of such programmes are impregnated with unconscious racism because they are all predicated on the unstated and unrecognized assumption that the blacks are the source of the problem. Yet virtually the whole of 'social problem' television about race and immigration—often made, no doubt, by well intentioned and liberal minded broadcasters—is precisely predicated on racist premisses of this kind. . . .

Recent critics of imperialism have argued that, if we simply extend our definition of nineteenth century fiction from one branch of 'serious fiction' to embrace popular literature, we will find a second, powerful strand of the English literary imagination to set beside the *domestic* novel: the male-dominated world of imperial adventure which takes *empire*, rather than *Middelmarch* as its microcosm.

I remember a graduate student, working on the construction of race in popular literature and culture at the end of the Nineteenth Century, coming to me in despair—racism was so *ubiquitous*, and at the same time, so *unconscious*—simply assumed to be the case—that it was impossible to get any critical purchase on it. In this period, the very idea of *adventure* became synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical mastery of the colonizers over the colonized.

Later, this concept of 'adventure'—one of the principal categories of modern *entertainment*—moved straight off the printed page into the literature of crime and espionage, children's books, the great Hollywood extravaganzas and comics. There, with recurring persistence, they still remain. Many of these older versions have had their edge somewhat blunted by time. They have been distanced from us, apparently, by our superior wisdom and liberalism. But they still reappear on the television screen, especially in the form of 'old movies' (some 'old movies,' of course, continue to be made). But we can grasp their recurring resonance better if we identify some of the base image of the 'grammar of race.'

There is, for example, the familiar *slave-figure*: dependable, loving in a simple, childlike way—the devoted 'Mammy' with the rolling eyes, or the faithful field-hand or retainer, attached and devoted to 'his' Master. The best known extravaganza of all—*Gone With The Wind*—contains rich variants of both. The 'slave-figure' is by no means limited to films and programmes about slavery. Some 'Injuns' and many Asians have come on to the screen in this disguise. A deep and unconscious ambivalence pervades this stereotype. Devoted and childlike, the 'slave' is also unreliable, unpredictable and undependable—capable of 'turning nasty,' or of plotting in a treacherous way, secretive, cunning, cut-throat once his or her Master's or Mistress's back is turned: and inexplicably given to running away into the bush at the slightest opportunity. The whites can never be sure that this

immigration.

Slave Mammy
sambo

impt
example

childish simpleton—'Sambo'—is not mocking his master's white manners behind his hand, even when giving an exaggerated caricature of white refinement.

native Another base-image is that of the 'native.' The good side of this figure is portrayed in a certain primitive nobility and simple dignity. The bad side is portrayed in terms of cheating and cunning, and, further out, savagery and barbarism. Popular culture is still full today of countless savage and restless 'natives,' and sound-tracks constantly repeat the threatening sound of drumming in the night, the hint of primitive rites and cults. Cannibals, whirling dervishes, Indian tribesmen, garishly got up, are constantly threatening to overrun the screen. They are likely to appear at any moment out of the darkness to decapitate the beautiful heroine, kidnap the children, burn the encampment or threaten to boil, cook and eat the innocent explorer or colonial administrator and his lady-wife. These 'natives' always move as an anonymous collective mass—in tribes or hordes. And against them is always counterposed the isolated white figure, alone 'out there,' confronting his Destiny or shouldering his Burden in the 'heart of darkness,' displaying coolness under fire and an unshakeable authority—exerting mastery over the rebellious natives or quelling the threatened uprising with a single glance of his steel-blue eyes.

clown/entertainer

A third variant is that of the 'clown' or 'entertainer.' This captures the 'innate' humour, as well as the physical grace of the licensed entertainer—putting on a show for The Others. It is never quite clear whether we are laughing with or at this figure: admiring the physical and rhythmic grace, the open expressivity and emotionality of the 'entertainer,' or put off by the 'clown's' stupidity.

One noticeable fact about all these images is their deep *ambivalence*—the double vision of the white eye through which they are seen. The primitive nobility of the ageing tribesman or chief, and the native's rhythmic grace always contain both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilized, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking just below the surface; or by an untutored sexuality, threatening to 'break out.' Both are aspects—the good and the bad sides—of *primitivism*. In these images, 'primitivism' is defined by the fixed proximity of such people to Nature.

Is all this so far away as we sometimes suppose from the representations of race which fill the screens today? These *particular* versions may have faded. But their *traces* are still to be observed, reworked in many of the modern and up-dated images. And though they may appear to carry a different meaning, they are often still constructed on a very ancient grammar.

Good + Bad

Pornographic Eroticism and Sexual Grotesquerie in Representations of African American Sportswomen

James McKay and Helen Johnson

Go Back To The Cotten [sic] Plantation Nigger. (Banner in the stands when Althea Gibson walked on court to defend her US Open title in 1958)

That's the way to do it! Hit the net like any Negro would! (Racist male heckling Serena Williams before she served at the 2007 Sony Ericsson Championships in Miami)

In this paper we use sport to encourage 'white' people to deconstruct the privileged lens through which they construct and view 'black' people. More specifically, we analyse how sections of the media have framed tennis champions Serena and Venus Williams as threats to sport's racist and sexist regime. Like other sportswomen of colour, the Williams sisters have challenged racist and sexist stereotypes and inspired millions of females around the world (Hargreaves, 2000, 2007). However, given that Althea Gibson and Serena Williams were subjected to blatant racism at tennis tournaments nearly 50 years apart, we should not be sanguine about the social constraints that African American sportswomen still encounter. . . .

Serena/Venus - threat to sports' racist + sexist regime.

From McKay, J., & Johnson, H. (2008). Pornographic eroticism and sexual grotesquerie in representations of African American sportswomen. *Social Identities*, 14(4), 491–504.

African American Sportswomen as Threats to Gender and Racial Hierarchies

gender hierarchies are threatened

Rowe (1990, p. 409) argues that gender hierarchies are threatened whenever women's bodies are deemed to be excessive: 'too fat, too mouthy, too old, too dirty, too pregnant, too sexual (or not sexual enough) for the norms of conventional gender representation.' Following Schulze (1990, p. 198), we can add muscularity to this list of corporeal transgressions: '[t]he deliberately muscular woman disturbs dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and any discursive field that includes her risks opening up a site of contest and conflict, anxiety and ambiguity.' While muscularity in women and men is becoming an increasingly desirable body type, it is, in the twenty-first century, hyper-muscularity in women that threatens heteronormative gender relations (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). . . .

Hyper-muscularity as both a new social phenomenon and a denigrating stereotype is especially evident in sport, which has embodied in the past the 'natural' superiority of men in contrast to the 'otherness' of female athletes as objects of ridicule, weakness, inferiority, decoration, passivity and as erotically desirable yet transgressive, but which is now searching for new ways to disparage the powerful and therefore 'uppity' African American sportswomen. . . .

A common strategy of reasserting masculine hegemony in sport is via 'pornographic eroticism,' in which sexuality is constructed as the 'primary characteristic of the person represented' (Heywood, 1998). Heywood distinguishes 'pornographic eroticism' from 'athletic eroticism,' in which sexuality is 'one dimension of human experience, as a quality that emerges from the self-possession, autonomy, and strength so evident in the body of a female athlete.' Although Heywood refers to bodybuilding, examples of 'pornographic eroticism' are prevalent in most sports (Glenny, 2006;

AF Am. sports women also threaten racial hierarchies.
Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2002; Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003).

While Heywood's concept of 'pornographic eroticism' is useful for explaining how female athletes in general are recuperated by the media, the negative coverage of the Williams sisters that we analyse below demonstrates that African American sportswomen also threaten racial hierarchies. Hence, we propose that the racialized anxieties that drive censorious responses to African American sportswomen are most effectively understood when situated within the historical context of black women's enslavement, colonial conquest, and exhibition as ethnographic 'grotesquerie.' The categorization of black women's bodies as hyper-muscular and their targeting for lascivious comment mirrors the public and pseudo-scientific response to nineteenth century exhibits of Saartjie Baartman, the South African woman labeled the 'Hottentot Venus' (Hobson, 2003, p. 87). Thus, we also use Hobson's concept of 'sexual grotesquerie,' which, in turn, was suggested by Morgan's (1997) analysis of European explorers' writings about Africa that depicted African women's bodies as mythic and monstrous. . . .

The 'Ghetto Cinderellas'

On Tuesday the story was Maria Sharapova's Swan Lake dress. On Wednesday it was Tatiana Golovin's red knickers. Yesterday it was Venus Williams' hot pants . . . [C]overage of men's tennis tends to focus on tennis. Not so the women's game, especially in the first week of a Grand Slam event when the lack of depth in the field means the opening rounds serve as a glorified warm-up for the 'big beasts.' (Moore 2007) *coverage of men's tennis focuses on tennis.*

'Pornographic eroticism' is particularly prominent in media coverage of women's tennis, where many players' physiques and

reasserting masculine hegemony in sport is via pornographic eroticism.

powerful -> objects

hyper-muscularity in women threatens heteronormative gender relations

performances are the objects of a constant gaze and are monitored for 'excess' (Harris & Clayton, 2002; Kennedy, 2001; Miller, McKay & Martin, 1999; Stevenson, 2002). Anna Kournikova has been criticized for trading on her looks and displaying more style than substance; Amelie Mauresmo was reproached for being openly lesbian and having a strong body and powerful topspin backhand; former world number 1 Justine Henin is belittled for having a drab image, while Maria Sharapova has been nicknamed 'The Glamazon,' to describe her combination of conventional good looks, statuesque physique, and powerful forehand (she also has been dubbed 'Shriekapova' and 'Belle of the Decibel' and censured for having a 'banshee-like grunt'); Daniela Hantuchova has been accused of being an anorexic, while Casey Dellacqua and Marion Bartoli have been condemned for allegedly being overweight. For instance, journalist Sue Mott (2007) described 2007 Wimbledon singles finalist Bartoli as 'more Friar Tuck than Maid Marion.'

Matthew Syed (2008) contends that

there has always been a soft-porn dimension to women's tennis, but with the progression of Maria Sharapova, Ana Ivanovic, Jelena Jankovic and Daniela Hantuchova to the semi-finals of the Australian Open, this has been into the realms of adolescent (and non-adolescent) male fantasy.

He complains that Western society has not 'reached a place where heterosexual men can acknowledge the occasionally erotic dimension of watching women's sport without being dismissed as deviant' thus articulating the unreflective, heterosexual, white male-centred viewpoint that is normative in mainstream media.

The Williams sisters also have been subjected to the carping critical gaze that both structures and is a key discursive theme of 'pornographic eroticism.' Of great significance, however, is that they also

have been constructed by derogatory racial, sexual and class stereotypes associated with African Americans. . . .

Since 1999 the Williams sisters have dominated international women's tennis by winning 14 Grand Slam singles titles (Serena eight, Venus six), five women's doubles and four mixed doubles Grand Slam titles, and gold medals in singles (Venus) and women's doubles at the Olympics. The Williams sisters began playing sport early while living in Compton, an economically impoverished area of Los Angeles, before moving to Florida while young. Whereas many tennis prodigies attend private tennis academies, the Williams sisters trained under the unorthodox regime of their father, Richard, a sharecropper's son from Louisiana. Serena and Venus have become wealthy international sporting superstars and celebrities, with incomes estimated at over \$US100 million from endorsement contracts with firms such as McDonald's, Nike, Wilson, Estée Lauder, and Reebok. Thus, they have been constructed within a 'ghetto-to-glory' narrative: a journalist referred to their ascent as a 'fairy tale, that astonishing narrative of the "ghetto Cinderella"' (Adams, 2005); one described Venus as a former 'teenage curio from a Los Angeles ghetto' (Muscat, 2007); and another stated that, 'Only in America would Venus have risen from her cradle of crack dealers and grunge courts to contest the women's singles final at Wimbledon' (Mott, 2000). Patton (2001, p. 122) refers to these sorts of narratives as 'an Africanized version of the Horatio Alger story in which athletics provides a route out of the ghetto.'

The exceptional performances of the Williams sisters have provoked complex and ambivalent narratives of qualified praise and grudging approval, as well as subtle and overt racism and sexism (Douglas, 2002, 2005; Schultz, 2002; Spencer, 2001, 2004). Media coverage of the Williams sisters is not always negative, because their performances are too extraordinary to be completely denigrated. For instance, in the lead-up to the 2003 French Open, Serena

Horatio Alger myth - meritocracy

appeared in an action shot on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with the caption 'Awesome.' Journalist Will Buckley (2007, p. 15) compared the Williams sisters to male legends like Pele, Muhammad Ali, Roger Federer, Tiger Woods, and Jack Nicklaus, rating them as the 'greatest duo' in sporting history. However, such praise co-exists with both subtle and overt racism and sexism. The Williams sisters have been criticized for lacking 'commitment' by refusing to conform to the Spartan training regime of professional tennis, restricting their playing schedules, having too many 'off-court interests' in acting, music, product endorsements, fashion and interior design, and their Jehovah's Witness religion. They have been accused of fixing matches against one another, cheating, and engaging in unsporting behaviour. They have been called arrogant, aloof, and self-absorbed; indicted for putatively ostentatious lifestyles and wearing expensive jewelry while not assisting African Americans affected by Hurricane Katrina; and disparaged for competing while wearing beaded cornrows and/or tinted hairstyles and 'tacky' outfits. At the 2002 US Open Serena was condemned for wearing a black 'catsuit', and in 2003 her appearance at a public function was disparaged as a 'hooker look' by *The Washington Post's* fashion writer:

She wore an orange crochet hussy dress modeled after something that Wilma Flintstone might choose. The low-cut dress, with its embroidered bodice, had a hemline that looked like it had been gnawed by Dino. . . . Her admirers paint a picture of poise and exuberance, talent and physical grace. One only wishes that Williams would use her wealth and notoriety to paint herself in equally flattering terms. (PostWatch, 2002)

In an article about the 2007 Wimbledon tournament, entitled 'Street style gives Venus her deadly cutting edge,' Venus was compared poorly to her vanquished opponent Akiko Morigami:

Williams the elder is urban hip-hop, a swirling, whirling, street babe who believes tennis is a sport best played at full volume. . . . With Williams wearing an ill-fitting vest and hot-pants outfit that might have been plucked off the *Primark* bargain rail, Morigami, the ultimate in femininity, won the consolation fashion stakes in her broderie anglaise skirt and scalloped sleeved top. (Philip, 2007)

The title of another article about Wimbledon condensed many of the above points. Although Venus was portrayed in an 'action shot,' the title was, 'Williams has designs on title despite host of outside distractions.' Much of the material was devoted to suggesting that Venus had played in her underwear, to her preoccupation with her interior design company, to the gold handbag she brings courtside, and to her guitar-playing skill (Smith, 2007). While Serena and Venus have been described as the 'Sisters Sledgehammer' (Bierley, 2004) and as having an 'Amazonian physique and piranha mentality' (Mott, 2000), Daniela Hantuchova, in contrast, was portrayed as playing tennis 'with grace and artistry, words that appeared to have been all but crushed by the blitzkrieg that was Venus and Serena Williams' (Viner, 2007).

Such commentary has often been anchored by the stereotypes to which we have alluded of black people being constructed as animalistic and closer to nature. Following Venus' victory at Wimbledon in 2000, a journalist hailed her as a 'role model for blacks' and lamented that black people had not been given more opportunities to participate in sport, because 'there is a natural physical superiority about those of African origin . . . only centuries of repression has prevented them becoming masters of so many sports' (Miller, 2000). Serena was described as a 'cat woman' at the 2002 US Open (Schutz, 2002), and Venus' quarterfinal victory over Sharapova at Wimbledon in 2007 was headlined 'Dying swan devoured as giant bird of prey returns to SW19,' with Barnes (2007) writing that, animalistic / closer to nature
natural physical superiority about Africans

savaged to death by giant bird of prey

'The dying swan [Maria Sharapova] slunk out in her tutu, savaged to death by a giant bird of prey—a Californian condor, if you like.' Marion Bartoli's loss to Venus in the final was attributed to the 'immense hard luck that Venus can chase from side to side like a cheetah on the run' (Mott, 2007), and Venus was also depicted as 'a panther, sensing a wounded animal' (White, 2007).

The Williams sisters arrived at the 2006 Australian Open in the unusual situation of being ranked lowly due to injuries and long lay-offs. Their commitment, fitness, and weight were targeted even before competition began. In 'Aussie defeat is the bottom line for overweight Serena,' British journalist Alix Ramsay (2006) claimed that

Both Venus and Serena were unfit, unprepared and under-done as the Open began. . . . Swanning into Melbourne as only they can, the sisters were seen shopping and posing around town. They certainly acted the part of superstar athletes but they certainly did not look it. Serena, in particular, was patently overweight and pictures of her larger-than-life figure were splashed across every newspaper in the land. . . . Clearly the sisters, 'cross-over celebrities' both, are too busy to devote their time exclusively to tennis.

pornographic eroticism

Journalists' fixation with Serena's diet, weight, fitness, and appearance then shifted into categories of 'pornographic eroticism' and 'sexual grotesquerie.' Her breasts and bottom were fetishized via headlines such as, 'Size up Serena Williams at your own risk' (Stevens, 2006), 'Serena out to kick butt' (Epstein, 2006), and 'Easybeat? Fat chance' (Crawford, 2006a), and photographs of her allegedly abnormal gluteal muscles and weight. When asked about her physical status, Serena commented that: 'Honestly, I've never read any comments about my fitness. I don't read the papers. I saw (a picture) of me running. And I was like, "Wow, my hamstring muscle is that big?" I had no idea my muscle was like that. But that's about it' (Epstein, 2006). One newspaper used the

headline 'Serena Shocked by Pictures,' but selectively printed Serena's comment about her hamstring being large, thereby suggesting she was alarmed (Crawford, 2006b). In one of Australia's 'quality' newspapers, journalist Stephen Gibbs (2006) compared Serena with Maria Sharapova in his article 'Big bum rap for Serena.'

Serena Williams has this great big arse. Some tennis commentators seem able to ignore the urge to record that for posterity and instead have concentrated on her career . . .

Righto. This is the spot for a sentence that starts: 'Before the letters of complaint come flooding in from the hairy-armpit brigade . . . ' This may or may not be interesting but, in fact, they never do. Those sentences are written for female colleagues and partners rather than letter-writing lesbians.

[But] Sharapova is a Russian glamour girl and can apparently play a bit, too. She is tanned, teenaged, firm of bottom and pert of breast. She has for some time been ranked No. 1 by the tennis world as the female player heterosexual males most want to up-end.

But that is not how they put it in the media, just as we don't say Serena Williams has a big arse.

. . . The authoritative discourse of 'science' was . . . used by a journalist, who consulted a sports medicine specialist about Serena's physique, and was advised that, 'It is the African-American race. They just have this huge gluteal strength. With Serena, that's her physique and genetics' (Stevens, 2006). The media attributed early upset losses by both Serena and Venus to excess weight, lack of commitment, and interest in 'frivolous' pursuits outside tennis, while an Australian journalist 'joked' that the quick exit of local hero Lleyton Hewitt was due to his dislike for the Rebound Ace courts, which were 'more dangerous than trying to steal Serena Williams's lunch box' (Hinds, 2006).

⊗ lazy, don't work hard, win b/c of genetics of African American race.

While Serena publicly stated during the 2007 Australian Open that her critics were haters who simply served to motivate her, such defiance intensified media attention. For instance, Hinds (2007a) wrote that Serena's game has always been about as subtle as a 'kick in the groin,' she had 'bludgeoned her way to seven grand slam titles with the swing of her executioner's blade,' and she had a 'chip on her shoulder.' He also alluded to her displeasure over losing a challenge to the electronic officiating system, Hawk-Eye, by posing the rhetorical question: 'Is she a Hawk-Eye hater, too?' (Hinds, 2007a). Despite struggling in the preliminary rounds, Serena reached the final, only to receive ongoing criticism that her progress highlighted the inferior status of women's tennis: *the fact that she got to final is the result of other players stupidity*

That she has reached the final speaks volumes for her competitive spirit and determination, while once again underlining the general lack of intelligence and creative ability of the other leading players. . . Williams has played so few tournaments in the last 13 months that her success here rather makes a mockery of the circuit. Why play at all if you can get to a grand slam final with virtually no previous match-play? . . . Williams should not have been able to get to the final with such ease. The fact that she has must be deeply embarrassing. (Bierley, 2007)

Serena easily defeated top-seeded Maria Sharapova in the final, an outcome that could have been embedded in several stock heroic sporting narratives: 'Champion rises to the occasion,' 'Comeback Queen,' or 'Serena battles through adversity.' Instead, her triumph was narrativized in recurrent deprecating and sexualized scripts: 'Champ focused on retail therapy after responding to critics' (Scott, 2007); 'Serena ignores the knockers' (Pearce, 2007); 'Cyclone Serena slams Maria and her knockers' (in which Serena was described as 'the game's Alpha female'—Niall, 2007a); and 'Sharapova

and the critics dealt a blow by Williams' sledgehammer' (in which Serena was said to resemble a 'wrecking ball' and to have an 'Exocet return'—Niall, 2007b). Hinds (2007b) reported her success via a mock attack on the behaviour of the highly respectable and respected men's champion, Roger Federer, with the sarcastic conclusion: 'See, Serena, you were right. We can hate anyone. It's just that you make it so much easier.' Serena's post-match response to the barrage of criticism was as powerful and as eloquent as her tennis:

I have a large arse and it always just looks like I'm bigger than the rest of the girls, but I have been the same weight for I don't know how long. If I lost 20 pounds, I'm still going to have these knockers, forgive me, and I'm still going to have this arse.

While the narratives of 'pornographic eroticism' were used to portray Griffith-Joyner nearly 20 years earlier, a journalist described a match by Serena at Wimbledon in 2007 in terms that had hardened into those of 'sexual grotesquerie':

Cartoonists would have been hard pressed to create Serena. First there was the body—all bosom, bottom and muscle. In her skintight faux leather bodysuit she gave Lara Croft a run for her money. (The great kinkster cartoonist Robert Crumb told me that she was his ideal woman; his idea of heaven was to be given a piggyback by Serena.) (Hattenstone, 2007)

At the 2008 Australian Open, the fixation turned to Venus with one newspaper article using the title, 'Venus Williams with a superior posterior' (Johnson, 2008). Jessica Halloran (2000), in a story entitled 'Venus win helps keep focus on bottom line,' reported that television commentator Roger Rasheed practically started salivating when admiring Venus's rear end during her first-round win. Venus then fielded questions

about Rasheed's comment with grace and humor in the post-game interview.

Conclusion

Our study shows that despite their outstanding sporting achievements, the Williams sisters have been subjected to the 'gender-specific images that deem black bodies as less desirable if not downright ugly' (Collins, 2004, p. 284); that is, their bodies have been positioned by the 'sexually grotesque.' The complex and ambivalent ways in which the Williams sisters have been constructed—exotic/erotic yet deviant and repulsive, athletic yet animalistic and primitive, unfeminine yet hyperfeminine, muscular yet threateningly hyper-muscular—is a reinscription of the 'Hottentot Venus' genealogy. . .

However, the very contradictions of their lived experiences as sportswomen provide some African-American sportswomen with the discursive tools to re-imagine and re-work their experiences in new ways, as the Williams sisters' responses to the media demonstrate. Paying attention to the multifaceted discourses and symbolic expressions through which African American people construct new forms of social identities has contributed to sociological understandings of marginalized people's responses to racism. Listening to the positive responses of African American women to negative readings of their corporeality could enable the sports industry to cultivate what Hobson (2003, p. 98) calls a black feminist aesthetic that recognizes the black female body as 'beautiful and desirable' in its distinction from stereotypes of white beauty.¹

Of greater significance, however, is the need for 'white' people to deconstruct their privileged perspectives and the powerful lenses through which they construct and view 'black' people, to develop a new critical race consciousness that can inform sporting commentary and media

sisters
respond positively

narratives. Since sport both reinforces and reproduces the 'persistent,' 'resurgent,' and 'veiled' forms of white power that permeate society (King, Leonard & Kusz, 2007, p. 4), a systematic targeting and 'outing' of racist and sexist narratives in sport has the potential to enable African American women and men to envision and achieve equality within a broader framework of social justice.²

Notes

1. Creff (1993) and Fabos (2001) have shown how Asian and Asian-American women figure skaters have also been inscribed by racist and sexist narratives.

2. For alternatives to the prevailing able-bodied, racist, sexist, and commodified representations of sportswomen, see the book, exhibition, and educational outreach programs based on Jane Gottesman's collection of photographs, which emphasize diversity and inclusion (Gottesman, 2003; *Game Face: What Does a Female Athlete Look Like?*).

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12

What Does Race Have to Do With *Ugly Betty*?

An Analysis of Privilege and Postracial(?) Representations on a Television Sitcom

Jennifer Esposito

The term “postracial” has been utilized in increasing amounts in the media to denote some people’s perceptions that the election of Barack Obama marks a new era in our society—one in which race no longer matters. This notion, while perhaps well-meaning, contradicts the very ways our society is structured. Race is an organizing principle (Henry 1995) in institutions such as government, schools, and popular culture. We cannot think or even act without racial categories becoming prominent. . . .

One place where racial discourse is especially powerful is within the institution of popular culture. We must continually critique and examine representations of racialized bodies, especially those bodies already marginalized within the system of racial hierarchies. In the spirit of continuing the examination of racial discourse, this chapter examines ABC’s television comedy *Ugly Betty*, in particular one episode that explores race-based affirmative action decisions and quotas (“When Betty Met YETI”). This episode of *Ugly Betty* aired two weeks after the 2008 election of Barack Obama. . . .

Ugly Betty, Privilege, and Affirmative Action

Betty Suarez, the fashion-challenged heroine of ABC’s sitcom *Ugly Betty*, works as an assistant to the editor of *Mode*, a high-fashion magazine. Part of her job entails meeting the multiple personal and professional needs of her boss, Daniel Meade, an irresponsible sex addict.

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Betty was hired by Daniel's father, Mr. Meade, precisely because Mr. Meade realized Daniel would not be attracted to a brown-skinned girl wearing braces and glasses. *Mode Magazine* is the context in which the series comedically explores issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The show offers lessons about making it in a competitive environment where beauty is everything and it is no secret that "beauty" is defined as "white, thin, upper-class, straight femininity"—a narrow conception of beauty. Those characters, including Betty, who fall outside of the definition of beauty learn to utilize other means to negotiate the environment. While the show does try to satirize stereotypes of race, gender, class, and sexuality, it nonetheless contributes to the reinscription of some stereotypes. Of course, as Stephen Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990, 93) suggest, "It is hardly surprising that comedy often perpetuates prejudice, or draws uncritically on racist and sexist stereotypes, since they provide a ready-made set of images of deviation from social and cultural norms." In addition, utilizing comedy to explore complex issues allows for the topics to be taken less seriously.

comedy to
explain
social issues
acceptable
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them

yet The regular characters of the show include Betty Suarez (played by America Ferrera), a twenty-two-year-old Mexican girl who works as an assistant to the editor, Daniel Meade (Eric Mabius). Other assistants include Marc (Michael Urie), who is white, gay, and knowledgeable about high fashion; and Amanda (Becki Newton), who is a blonde-haired, white, very thin woman who has sex with Daniel. . . .

Betty and Marc are both assistants: Betty works directly for Daniel while Marc works directly for Wilhelmina. Both their jobs include completing rather personal tasks for their bosses that would not seem part of their job descriptions. For example, Betty had to track down a watch Daniel left at a woman's house. He, however, could not remember which woman he slept with the night he left the watch. Betty had to send flowers and then make personal visits to seven women's apartments to retrieve the watch. Marc, on

the other hand, must flatter Wilhelmina on her beauty, brains, and accomplishments. He also injects her with botox, a chemical to help her retain a "youthful" appearance. Both Betty and Marc understand how they are used and not appreciated and, thus, have dreams of being much more than mere assistants and strive to be editors.

In the third season, Betty and Marc both apply to YETI (Young Editors Training Institute). The program is highly competitive and accepts one assistant per magazine for training and apprenticeship as editor. As part of the interview, each applicant must create and market a magazine. Applicants must also be sponsored by an "insider" to the business. Marc worked on his magazine presentation for three months and created a complete magazine. He also chose celebrity sponsors who happened to know one of the judges. Betty only found out about the program forty-eight hours before the interview, so she rushed to put a magazine presentation together. She also asked Daniel to sponsor her, and although he said yes, he never finished her letter of recommendation.

As viewers, we see Betty's interview. She is her usual self—not very confident but charming nonetheless. In fact, one of the judges, a caramel-complexioned woman (her race is not evident but she appears white or Latina, based on hair and skin color), tries to give Betty personal encouragement by smiling and nodding during her presentation. Betty's idea, a magazine about women who are intelligent, beautiful, and independent, seemed to be liked by the judges. We are not, as viewers, privy to Marc's presentation. We do know that Marc shows up with a "team" and his sponsors, and we are led to believe he also completed a very good interview. It is Betty, however, who is accepted into the program. Marc is denied entry because he and Betty both work at the same magazine and YETI only accepts one intern per magazine.

Betty walks over to apologize to Marc when she finds out she was accepted and he was not. Marc, acting bitter about his loss, tells Betty his presentation was one

thousand times better than hers. Betty says to him, "Maybe they just liked my concept better... who knows why they picked me?" Marc laughs and says, "Yeah, OK. Whatever." Betty suggests that perhaps she "wanted it" more than he did and, therefore, she was offered the internship. It is in this way Betty relies on the ideology of meritocracy as she believes that she wanted it more and, therefore, worked harder for it. She understands that she and Marc were evaluated as individuals and her presentation obviously conveyed more passion than Marc's. Marc does not believe this and implies (via tone of voice and a knowing look) that he knows the "real" reasons she was picked and he was not. Betty asks him why he thinks they picked her over him. Marc refuses to tell her, so Betty continues to ask him. Finally he says, "Do you really think that what you did in two days is better than what I spent three months working on? Are you really gonna make me say it?" Betty incredulously asks, "Say what?" Marc fires at her, "You help them meet their quota." Betty looks shocked and says, "What are you talking about?" Marc yells, "I mean they picked you, Betty Suarez of Queens, because you are Latina." Betty pulls back, shaking her head no. Marc continues, "Because you are a token ethnic girl." Betty gets upset and says "What? They picked me... that doesn't even make sense. Wow, Marc you have said a lot of ugly things to me in the past but that is by far and away the ugliest." Marc refuses to back down from his position and says, "Well, I'm sorry Betty. It may be ugly, but it's the truth." At this moment, we have no idea how Marc has even acquired this knowledge or if it is just his assumption. But the anger the issue raises between them is palpable.

Marc does not utilize the term "affirmative action." Instead, he refers to quotas, a word indelibly linked in popular discourse with race-based affirmative action policies. Affirmative action became policy in the 1960s under President Johnson. The policy was initially launched to help improve the employment and educational access of

meritocracy.
"minorities," including people of color, and white women. Affirmative action now has a long history of contestation by whites and has been charged with creating "reverse discrimination." At issue is the notion of whiteness as property and the questions surrounding who owns it, who has access to it, and who fights to protect it. Claims about reverse discrimination belie the very ways white privilege has been made invisible. Affirmative action is perceived as a threat to whiteness as property because it enables people of color access to education and employment previously reserved as the "property" of whites (Harris 1993). Although much of Marc's disdain for a race-based affirmative action policy is communicated through his facial expressions, he is portrayed as angry and ready to claim the status of "victim."

In the next scene, Betty's family comes in to the office to celebrate her acceptance into YETI. They speak and sing, partially in Spanish and partially in English, while making lots of celebratory noise. Betty's Mexicanness becomes hypervisible at this moment. Although she is regularly positioned as Other because of her looks and her status as a working-class Latina from Queens, she has never before apologized for her identity and, in fact, seems oblivious that her status within race, class, and beauty hierarchies could even affect her. Betty, up until this point, has been the poster child for the belief in meritocracy: that as long she works hard enough, she will achieve. The text generally seems to support this notion as well. Although Betty faces obstacles related to her looks, class, and race, she always manages to overcome. As the loveable heroine, Betty always finds a way to get the job done without ever claiming she was discriminated against or without any recognition that hierarchies exist in the fashion and business worlds.

In this episode, however, Betty seems embarrassed, as white coworkers look at her and her family in disgust. Betty seems to recognize the ways her family has been positioned due to racialized hierarchies.

relies
meritocracy

white
privilege
invisible

poster
child for
meritocracy

was word quotas

The usually quiet office had been interrupted with difference (loud colors and Spanish words/songs). Betty pulls her father and sister into a separate room and explains what happened. She says she was nothing more than a quota to YETI. She says, "Well, I called and they didn't exactly deny it." Her sister says, "Who cares why you got in? You got in. Look, you got to take every advantage you can in this life." Hilda shares with Betty that when she goes to the butcher shop, "I put on my tightest tank top and say thank you to the pointer sisters" (she points to her breasts); she says that is what gets her to the front of the line and she does not care if it is unfair to other people.

immigrant struggles Ignacio, Betty's father, also helps lift her spirits. He starts to remind her of the struggles he and her mother faced as immigrants to the country. Hilda complains while rolling her eyes, "Oh, here goes the young immigrant story." Although Betty seems equally annoyed about the story, she bows her head and sits. Her father tells her, "If being Mexican helped this time, take it." Betty replies, "No, Papi. I wanted to be accepted because I earned it." He touches her head and says, "You did."

qualifications The scene ends with that tender moment, but we are left wondering what Ignacio meant. In what ways did Ignacio believe Betty earned it? As viewers we are left to weigh the evidence. Marc had spent three months on his magazine to Betty's one night. Marc had two important sponsors and a slight advantage with nepotism (although not directly related to each other, Marc and his sponsors share the same race and sexual orientation). Betty's sponsor did not even submit a letter of reference for her. Marc had worked as an assistant for four years to Betty's two years. Marc had a team who helped him prepare while Betty only had herself. Did Ignacio really believe that Betty earned the acceptance into the program of her own accord?

In this episode, as in many affirmative action debates, a race-based affirmative

most imp!
race-based affirmative action decision is portrayed as being made who regard to qualifications. action decision is portrayed as being made without regard to qualifications and talent. . . . A binary has clearly been created between talent and race. Perhaps Betty's talent was similar to Marc's, but we do not know this. We only know that Marc assumes Betty was given the opportunity because she satisfied a quota, and that when Betty called YETI to ask if this was true, "They didn't exactly deny it." How do we, as viewers, make sense of this?

In the next relevant scene, Betty walks up to Marc, hands him an envelope, and says, "You're in. You were right. Your presentation was better than mine. I dropped out and you're in." Marc responds in disbelief, "Are you crazy? I have been discriminated against my whole life. If I was given an advantage like you I would take it and run with it." Betty does not buy Marc's claims of oppression, and she replies, "Marc, you are a gay man in the fashion industry. You have plenty of advantages." Marc says to her, "That gets me nothing." Of course, in the guise of comedy, it is then that a stereotypical gay man comes up to Marc and hands him backstage Madonna tickets. Recognizing the irony of this, Marc tilts his head and clarifies that it is outside of the fashion world he gets nothing. Betty tells him, "Marc, at the end of the day you deserved it more." Marc pauses, and Betty tells him to take it before she changes her mind. He takes it. *situation + privilege*

imp! This exchange does not force Marc to examine his white privilege. Marc, as a white gay man working in the fashion world, is relationally privileged and oppressed. Gay men are relatively prominent in the fashion world (see Lewis [2007] for a recent critique of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a television show where five gay men are positioned as fashion and lifestyle experts). Betty tries to make Marc's gay privilege within the realm of Mode visible, but he gets defensive and will not truly recognize it. Claiming a victim stance, Marc shrugs off the example of the concert ticket as an individual privilege. Betty sees the irony of this, but Marc silences the rest of the

imp!
L situation.
Gay privilege w/ the Fashion World

conversation by claiming that he is oppressed as a gay man outside of the fashion world. . . .

As in all lighthearted comedies, by the end of the episode, all is well. Daniel makes a call and tells YETI that Betty also worked at *Players Magazine* that year. She and Marc, therefore, could be listed as assistants at separate magazines. Daniel also provides Betty a copy of the recommendation letter he sent to YETI. It is a six-page document, and we are led to believe that Daniel, although he often falls through on promises to Betty, genuinely cares for her despite his many faults. This move on his part—making one phone call to solve Betty's current problem—constructs him as the "great white hope" (see Giroux [1993] for a discussion of the role of whites as saviors in the lives of young adults of color). He becomes Betty's savior by swooping down at the last minute and exercising his power and privilege.

While Betty certainly gains from this move, the real issues of race-based affirmative action and quotas are never fully explored. Marc's resentment is still there. Betty's doubts about her abilities in relation to Marc's still remain. And viewers are left with reified notions of difference. . . .

Betty's refusal to accept the internship (once she realized being Mexican assisted her) reifies the notion that one must succeed on her or his own without anyone's assistance. What is ironic about the episode is that, while Betty believed morally and ethically that she wanted to be accepted into the program on her own merits, Marc's standpoint was different, although it was not articulated as such. Marc brought a "team" with him, including his two famous sponsors (thereby promoting nepotism) and friends/coworkers who helped him with his presentation. While Betty sat at her kitchen table alone and constructed her presentation, it is presumed Marc had his team help him construct his.

Yet Marc feels powerless against race-based affirmative action policies. He believes he was the better candidate and that

Betty, the "Latina from Queens," did not fully earn her acceptance into the internship. As Applebaum (2005) articulates,

The ability to deny the presence and power of current everyday racism and the undeserved benefits that some groups accrue at the expense of others, is premised on the ability to see oneself "as an individual" and not to see oneself "as white." To see oneself "as white" and to interrogate what that means would undermine the appeal of the innocent victim upon which arguments about reverse discrimination are based. (p. 286)

name +
examine
whiteness

Based on this reading of *Ugly Betty* as a text about race, one can surmise that we, as a nation, are not postracial. On the contrary, race still structures our lives. . . . In lieu of ignoring race, we need, instead, to start examining the ways race, history, popular culture and the political economy continue to work in tangent to sustain racialized hierarchies.

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Great
White
hope

13

Ralph, Fred, Archie, Homer, and the King of Queens

Why Television Keeps Re-Creating the Male Working-Class Buffoon

Richard Butsch

Strewn across our mass media are portrayals that justify class relations of modern capitalism. Studies of comic strips, radio serials, television series, movies, and popular fiction reveal a very persistent pattern, underrepresenting working-class occupations and overrepresenting professional and managerial occupations, minimizing the visibility of the working class. Similar patterns are evident for other subordinate statuses on race, gender, and regional lines.

My own studies of class in prime-time network television family series from 1946 to 2004 (Butsch, 1992, 2005; Butsch & Glennon, 1983; Glennon & Butsch, 1982) indicate that this pattern persists over six decades of television and roughly 400 domestic situation comedies, including such icons as *I Love Lucy*, *The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family*, and *The Simpsons*. In only about 10% of the series were heads of house portrayed as working class (i.e., holding occupations as blue-collar, clerical, or unskilled or semi-skilled service workers). Widespread affluence was exaggerated as well. More lucrative, glamorous, or prestigious professions predominated over more mundane ones. Working wives were almost exclusively middle class and pursuing a career. Working-class wives, like Roseanne, who have to work to help support the family, were rare.

Throughout these decades, the few working-class men were portrayed as buffoons. They were dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense. This is the character of the husbands in almost every sitcom depicting a blue-collar head of house, *The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*, and *The King of Queens* being the most famous examples. The man was typically well intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men were played against more sensible wives, such as Alice in *The Honeymooners* or Carrie in *King of Queens*.

For most of this history, there were few buffoons in middle-class series. More typically, both parents were wise and worked cooperatively to raise their children in practically

perfect families like those in *Father Knows Best*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Bill Cosby Show*. The humor came from the innocent foibles and fumbles of the children. The few middle-class buffoons were usually the dizzy wife, like Lucy, while the professional/managerial husband was the sensible, mature partner. Inverting gender status in working-class but not middle-class sitcoms makes this a statement about class more than gender.

The 1990s brought a shift in parts of this pattern. There was a significant increase in the number and percentage of working-class families represented in domestic sitcoms: Of 42 new domestic sitcoms from 1991 to 1999, 16 featured working-class families, and 9 were Black. Reverting to form, in the 2000s, only 3 more new working-class and 4 African American sitcoms were added. By 2008, working-class sitcoms again disappeared ("TV's Class Struggle," 2008). The depictions of middle-class males became more diverse in these two decades, with males in shows such as *Home Improvement* and *Two and a Half Men*, who succeeded at work but at home exhibited an insistent adolescent macho maleness—not buffoons, but not super-parents either.

Still, the portrayals of working-class men remained relatively unchanged. The successful *King of the Hill* (1997), *King of Queens* (1998), and *Family Guy* (1999), as well as several shorter lived series throughout the decade, reproduced the traditional stereotyped working-class man cast opposite capable women. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Why does television keep re-producing these caricatures across six decades, despite major changes in the television industry? How does it happen? Seldom have studies of television industries pinpointed how specific content arises. Studies of production have not been linked to studies of content any more than audience studies have. What follows is an effort to explain the link between sitcom production and the persistent images produced. In the words of

no man in back deciding all this
Connell (1977), "No evil-minded capitalistic plotters need be assumed because the production of ideology is seen as the more or less automatic outcome of the normal, regular processes by which commercial mass communications work in a capitalist system" (p. 195). It is the outcome of a complex of structural and cultural factors that shaped and continues to shape the representation of working-class men, even as the television industry underwent remarkable changes from the 1980s on.

I will describe the factors as they worked from the beginnings of TV sitcoms in the late 1940s into the 1980s, then examine what effects on representation were wrought by the growth of cable TV and VCR in the 1980s, computers and the Internet in the 1990s, and the concomitant restructuring of the industry into a new oligopoly of global multimedia corporations. I will look at three levels of organization: (1) network domination of the industry, (2) the organization of decisions within the networks and on the production line, and (3) the work community and culture of the "creative personnel." I will trace how these may explain the consistency and persistence of the portrayals, the underrepresentation of the working class, and the specific negative stereotypes of working-class men in prime-time domestic sitcoms.

Network Domination and Persistent Images

For four decades, ABC, CBS, and NBC dominated the television industry. Ninety percent of television audiences watched these networks. They accounted for more than half of all television advertising revenues in the 1960s and 1970s, and just under half by the late 1980s (Owen & Wildman, 1992). They therefore had the money and the audience to dominate the market as the only buyers of series programming from Hollywood producers and

studios. The television series market was thus an oligopsony—the buyer equivalent to an oligopoly—with only three buyers of sitcoms and several sellers (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 1980; Owen & Wildman, 1992).

Through the 1980s, cable networks and multistation owners (companies that own several local broadcast stations) began to challenge the dominance of the big three. The big networks' combined rating shrank from 56.5% in 1980 to 39.7% in 1990—the latter number even including the new Fox Broadcasting network that debuted in 1986 (Butsch, 2000, p. 269; Hindman & Wiegand, 2008). By 1999, the four-network rating had slipped to 28.6% ("Upscale Auds Ease B'casters," 1999), while advertising-supported cable had grown to 23.9% ("Young Auds Seek Web, Not Webs," 1999). Still, only five cable networks had sufficient funds in the 1990s to qualify as buyers of drama programming (Blumler & Spicer, 1990). In 2000, cable networks were beginning to become a factor in the market for new drama and comedy series ("B'cast, Cable: Trading Places," 2000), yet ABC, CBS, and NBC still accounted for the development of the overwhelming majority of new series. However, by 2008, cable networks had become major buyers of new scripted series ("TV Role Reversal," 2009).

Dominance by the broadcast networks may have slipped, but many of the same factors that shaped their programming decisions shape the decisions of their cable competitors as well. The increased number of buyers has not resulted in the innovation and diversity in program development once expected (FCC, 1980). Jay Blumler and Carolyn Spicer (1990) and Robert Kubey (2004) interviewed writers, directors, and producers and found that the promise of more openness to innovation and creativity was short-lived. The cost of drama programming limits buyers to only a handful of large corporations and dictates that programs must attract a large audience and avoid risk. Moreover, even when cable networks

became viable buyers, they did not increase significantly the number of buyers because they seek niche markets, and a given new series idea can be sold only to a cable network seeking that niche. In other words, sitcoms tend to be custom-made for a particular network.

Using their market power, networks have maintained sweeping control over production decisions of even highly successful producers, from the initial idea for a new program to a final film or tape (Bryant, 1969, pp. 624–626; Gitlin, 1983; Pekurny, 1977, p. 1982; Winick, 1961). In the 1990s, the FCC freed the broadcast networks from rules established in 1970 to reduce their power. This allowed them to increase ownership of programs and in-house production and re-create the vertical integration of television production of the 1950s and 1960s ("TV's Little Guys Stayin' Alive," 2001).

Both broadcast and cable networks' first concern affecting program decisions is risk avoidance. Popular culture success is notoriously unpredictable. The music recording industry spreads risk over many albums so that any single decision is less significant (Peterson & Berger, 1971; Rossman, 2005). Spreading risk is not a strategy available to networks (neither broadcast nor cable) since only a few programming decisions fill the prime-time hours that account for most income. Networks are constrained further from expanding the number of their decisions by their use of the series as the basic unit of programming. The benefit of the series format is that it increases ratings predictability from week to week, but it reduces the number of prime-time programming decisions to less than 50 for the whole season. So each decision represents a considerable financial risk, not simply in production costs but in advertising income as well. Success may produce a windfall. For example, ABC multiplied its profits fivefold from 1975 to 1978 by raising its average prime-time ratings from 16.6 to 20.7 (W. Behanna,

personal communication, 1980). But mistakes can cause severe losses.

Since programming decisions were and continue to be risky and costly, and network executives' careers rest on their ability to make the right decisions, they are constrained, in their own interest, to avoid innovation and novelty. They stick to tried and true formulas, a common complaint among successful television writers and producers (Brown, 1971; Kubey, 2004; Wakshlag & Adams, 1985). They also prefer those who have a track record of success. The result is a small, closed community of proven creative personnel (roughly 500 producers, writers, and directors) closely tied to and dependent on the networks (Gitlin, 1983, pp. 115, 135; Kubey, 2004; Pekurny, 1982; Tunstall & Walker, 1981, pp. 77–79). These proven talents then self-censor their work on the basis of a product image their previous experience tells them the networks will tolerate (Cantor, 1971; Pekurny, 1982; Ravage, 1978), creating an "imaginary feedback loop" (DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976) between producers and network executives. These same conditions characterized program development in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, since the new buyers of programming, cable networks, operate under the same constraints as broadcast networks.

To avoid risk, network executives have chosen programs that repeat the same images of class, decade after decade. More diverse programming appeared only in the early days of the industry when there were no past successes to copy—broadcast television in the early 1950s and cable in the early 1980s—or when declining ratings made it clear that past successes no longer worked (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Turow, 1982b, p. 124). Dominick (1976) found that the lower the profits of the networks, the more variation in program types could be discerned from season to season and the less network schedules resembled each other. For example, in the late 1950s, ABC introduced hour-long western series to prime time in order to become competitive with NBC and CBS (FCC, 1965). Again, in

1970, CBS purchased Norman Lear's then controversial *All in the Family*—other networks turned it down—to counteract a drift to an audience with demographics (rural and over 50) not desired by advertisers. Increased numbers of working-class and African American sitcoms occurred in the 1990s when television executives feared that the white middle class was turning to other entertainments ("Genre-ation Gap Hits Sitcoms," 1999).

Acceptance by networks of innovative programs takes much longer than conventional programs and requires backing by the most successful producers (Turow, 1982b, p. 126). For example, *Roseanne* was introduced by Carsey-Werner, producers of the top-rated *Cosby Show*, when ABC was trying to counter ratings losses (Reeves, 1990, pp. 153–154). Hugh Wilson, the creator of *WKRP* and *Frank's Place*, described CBS in 1987 as desperate about slipping ratings: "Consequently they were the best people to work for from a creative standpoint" (Campbell & Reeves, 1990, p. 8). Even as declining ratings spurred networks to try innovative programs in the 1990s, they still tended to hire proven talent within the existing production community. The new ideas that were accepted came from (or through) established figures in the industry. As cable networks began to buy series, they contributed to this pattern by supporting programming that satisfied their niche audience but would offend some portion of the broadcast networks' mass market.

Network Decision Making— Program Development

The second factor affecting network decisions on content is the need to produce programming suited to advertising. What the audience wants—or what network executives imagine they want—is secondary to ad revenue. Pay-cable networks, not bound by this constraint, have been freer to explore sexual and violent content, as in the

Sopranos, that may have scared off advertisers but attracts an audience. In matters of content, advertising-supported networks avoid content that will offend or dissatisfy advertisers (Bryant, 1969). For example, ABC contracts with producers in 1977 stipulated that

no program or pilot shall contain . . . anything . . . which does not conform with the then current business or advertising policies of any such sponsor; or which is detrimental to the good will or the products or services of . . . any such sponsor. (FCC, 1980, Appendix C, p. A-2)

Gary Marshall, producer of several highly successful series in the 1970s, stated that ABC rejected a storyline for *Mork & Mindy*, the top-rated show for 1978, in which Mork takes TV ads literally, buys everything, and creates havoc. Despite the series' and Marshall's proven success, the network feared advertisers' reactions to such a storyline.

An advertiser's preferred program is one that allows full use of the products being advertised. The program should be a complementary context for the ad. In the 1950s, an ad agency rejecting a play about working-class life stated, "It is the general policy of advertisers to glamorize their products, the people who buy them, and the whole American social and economic scene" (Barnouw, 1970, p. 32). Advertisers in 1961 considered it "of key importance" to avoid "irritating, controversial, depressive, or 'downbeat' material" (FCC, 1965, p. 373). This requires dramas built around affluent characters for whom consuming is not problematic. Thus, affluent characters predominate and occupational groups with higher levels of consumer expenditure are overrepresented. Even in a working-class domestic sitcom, it is unusual for financial strain to be a regular theme of the show—*The Honeymooners* and *Roseanne* are two exceptions to this.

A third factor in program decisions is whether it will attract the right audience.

Network executives construct a product image of what they *imagine* the audience wants—which surprisingly often is not based on actual market research on audiences (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Pekurny, 1982). Michael Dann, a CBS executive, was "concerned the public might not accept a program about a blue collar worker" when offered the pilot script for *Arnie* in 1969 (before *All in the Family* proved that wrong and after a decade in which the only working-class family appearing in prime time was *The Flintstones*). On the other hand, in 1979, an NBC executive expressed the concern that a couple in a pilot was too wealthy to appeal to most viewers (Turow, 1982b, p. 123). Sitcom producer Lee Rich said, "A television series, to be truly successful, has got to have people you can identify with or dream about being" (Kubey, 2004, p. 102). For the sought after middle-class audience, then, advertisers prefer affluent middle-class characters.

conspicuous consumption

Aside from anecdotes such as I have mentioned, almost no research has examined program development or production decisions about class content of programs. My own research found no significant differences between characters in sitcom pilots and series from 1973 to 1982, indicating that class biases in content begin very early in the decision-making process, when the first pilot episode is being developed (Butsch, 1984). I therefore conducted a mail survey of the producers, writers, or directors of the pilots from 1973 to 1982. I specifically asked how the decisions were made about the occupation of the characters in their pilot. I was able to contact 40 persons concerning 50 pilots. I received responses from 6 persons concerning 12 pilots.

Although this represents only a small portion of the original sample, their responses are strikingly similar. Decisions on occupations of main characters were made by the creators and made early in program development, as part of the program idea. In no case did the occupation become a matter of debate or disagreement with the networks. Moreover, the choice of

occupation was incidental to the situation or other aspect of the program idea; thus, it was embedded in the creators' conception of the situation. For example, according to one writer, a character was conceived of as an architect "to take advantage of the Century City" location for shooting the series; the father in another pilot was cast as owner of a bakery after the decision to do a series about an extended Italian family; in another pilot, the creator thought the actor "looked like your average businessman." The particular occupations and even the classes are not necessitated by the situations that creators offered as explanations. But they do not seem to be hiding the truth; their responses were open and unguarded. It appears they did not consciously consider whether they wished to portray this particular class or occupation; rather, to them, the occupations were derivative of the situation or location or actors they chose. They didn't think of characters explicitly in terms of a class but rather as a personality type that may conjure up a particular occupation. This absence of any awareness of decisions about class is confirmed by Gitlin's (1983) and Kubey's (2004) interviews with industry personnel. Thus, the process of class construction seems difficult to document given the unspoken guidelines, the indirect manner in which they suggest class, and the absence of overt decisions about class. Class or occupation is not typically an issue for discussion, as obscenity and race are. The choice of class is thus diffuse and indirect, drawn from a culture that provides no vocabulary to think explicitly and speak directly about class. To examine this further, we need to look at the organization of the production process and the culture of creative personnel.

The Hollywood Input— Television Series Production

Within the production process in Hollywood studios and associated organizations, as well

as in the work culture of creative personnel, we find factors that contribute to the use of simple and repetitious stereotypes of working-class men.

An important factor in television drama production is the severe time constraints of production (Kubey, 2004; Lynch, 1973; Ravage, 1978; Reeves, 1990). The production schedule for a series requires that a finished program be delivered to the networks each week. Even if the production company had the entire year over which to complete the season's 22 to 24 episodes, an episode would have to be produced on the average every 2 weeks, including script writing, casting, staging, filming, and editing. This is achieved through an assembly line process where several episodes are in various stages of production and being worked on simultaneously by the same team of producer, writers, director, and actors.

Such a schedule puts great pressures on the production team to simplify the amount of work necessary and decisions to be made, as much as possible. The series format is advantageous for this reason: When the general storyline and main characters are set, the script can be written following a simple formula. For situation comedy, even the sets and the cast do not change from episode to episode.

The time pressures contribute in several ways to dependence on stereotypes for characterization. First, sitcoms are based on central characters rather than plot and development. These characters are coming into the living rooms of people who have to like to watch the characters and find them believable (Kubey, 2004). All this means that, to sell a new series, writers should offer stock characters (i.e., stereotypes). Writing for the same stock character, week after week, also greatly reduces the task of producing a script.

Also, time pressure encourages typecasting for the minor characters who are new in each episode. The script is sent to a "break-down" agency, which reads the script and extracts the description of characters for that episode. These brief character descriptions,

not the script, are used by the casting agency to recommend actors (Turow, 1978). Occupation and, by inference, class are an important part of these descriptions, being identified for 84% of male characters. Not surprisingly, the descriptions are highly stereotyped (Turow, 1980).

Producers, casting directors, and casting agencies freely admit the stereotyping but argue its necessity on the basis of time and dramatic constraints. Typecasting is easier and much quicker. They also argue that to diverge from widely held stereotypes would draw attention away from the action, the storyline, or other characters and destroy dramatic effect. In addition, stereotyped stock characters are familiar to audiences, requiring less dramatic explanation. Thus, unless the contradiction of the stereotype is the basic story idea—as in *Arnie*, a blue-collar worker suddenly appointed corporate executive—there is a very strong pressure to reproduce existing stereotypes.

The time pressures also make it more likely that the creators will stick to what is familiar to them as well. Two of the most frequent occupations of main characters in family series were in entertainment and writing (i.e., modeled on the creators' own lives; Butsch & Glennon, 1983). The vast majority of writers and producers come from upper-middle-class families, with little direct experience of working-class life (Cantor, 1971; Gitlin, 1983; Kubey, 2004; Stein, 1979; Thompson & Burns, 1990). Moreover, the tight schedules and deadlines of series production leave no time for becoming familiar enough with working-class lifestyle to be able to capture it realistically. Those who have done so (e.g., Jackie Gleason, Norman Lear) had childhood memories of working-class neighborhoods to draw upon.

Thus, the time pressure encourages creative personnel to rely heavily on a shared and consistent product image—including diffuse and undifferentiated images of class—embedded in what Elliott (1972) called the media culture. The small, closed

community of those engaged in television production, including Hollywood creators and network executives (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Gitlin, 1983; Stein, 1979; Tunstall & Walker, 1981; Turow, 1982a), shares a culture that includes certain conceptions of what life is like and what the audience finds interesting. The closedness of this community is both reflected in and reinforced by the hiring preference for proven talent already in the community, lack of any apprenticeship system to train new talent, and the importance of social networking or, as one director phrased it, “nepotism,” in obtaining work (Kubey, 2004). According to Norman Lear, the production community draws its ideas from what filters into it from the mass media, which is then interpreted through the lens of their own class experience and culture, to guess what “the public” would like and formulate images of class they think are compatible (Gitlin, 1983, pp. 204, 225–226).

While the consistency of image, the underrepresentation of the working class, and the use of stereotypes can be explained by structural constraints, the particular stereotypes grow from a rather diffuse set of cultural images, constrained and framed by the structure of the industry.

Reaching the vast majority of the population for over a half century and seeping into everyday conversation, sitcoms have made a significant contribution to our culture's attitude toward the man who makes his living with his hands. It is an attitude based on the presumption that these sitcoms repeated again and again—that this man is dumb, immature, irresponsible, lacking common sense, often frustrated, and sometimes angry. This legitimates his low pay and close supervision at work. Furthermore, it is an attitude of disrespect for him everywhere else in the public realm. It is that disrespect that is the ultimate “hidden injury” that working-class interviewees expressed to Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) in the early 1970s, just about the time Archie Bunker first appeared on network television.

The continuing stereotype in sitcoms tells us *plus ça change*, the injury remains the same.

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Television's "New" Feminism

Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization

Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti

In the fall of 1999, NBC debuted its second program in the *Law & Order* franchise, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (hereafter *SVU*), a scripted series devoted to crimes of sexual assault and rape. Although the runaway success of the original *Law & Order* helped assure an eager audience for the new venture, the seemingly narrow focus on a subject as emotionally and politically charged as rape took the television crime genre in an unexpected direction. *SVU*'s popularity over the last five years raises questions about the series' ability to introduce the topic of sexual violence into the prime-time arena and sustain viewership. How does a prime-time fictional chronicling of sexual violence, trauma, and victimization operate within the confines of the traditionally masculine genre of detective fiction? What forms of feminism, if any, does such a prime-time focus on sexual violence enable?

With its "ripped from the headlines" storylines *SVU* centers on cases undertaken by a police unit modeled after the New York Police Department's Special Victims Unit.¹ In the tradition of television crime dramas, the series spotlights the detective duo of Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) and Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni), and an ensemble cast of characters that include Odafin Tutuola (Ice-T) and John Munch (Richard Belzer), Captain Donald Cragen (Dann Florek), Assistant D. A. Casey Novak (Diane Neal), medical examiner Melinda Warner (Tamara Tunie), and police psychologist George Huang (B. D. Wong).² *SVU* is both similar to and different from the original title series, *Law & Order*, which combines the genres of the cop show and the legal drama. *SVU* episodes rarely include a trial and although most of its narratives end with the positive identification of the perpetrator,

From Cuklanz, L. M., & Moorti, S. (2006). Television's "new" feminism: Prime-time representations of women and victimization. *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, 23(4), 302-321. Copyright © National Communication Association, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd. (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>) on behalf of the National Communication Association.

some conclude with the criminal still at large.³ Producer Dick Wolf characterizes it as a “compelling” cop drama that tracks the emotional effects of the crimes on its two protagonist detectives and on victims. Like the original title series, *SVU* begins with a voice-over that provides the program with a sense of verisimilitude:

In the criminal justice system, sexually-based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories. (<http://www.tvtome.com/lawandorder/svu>)

Shot on location in New York City, *SVU* shares several of the signature elements of the title series: scene-setting labeling, staccato music, edgy camerawork, sudden shifts in scenes, and use of street argot. Airing originally on NBC, episodes are shown nine days later on the cable channel USA, following a unique syndication policy termed “reuposing.”

SVU is distinguished by its subject matter, which reprises decades-long feminist discussions of violence against women. If rape provides a foundational feminist allegory for women’s subordinated status in society (Sielke, 2002), *SVU*’s decision to base an entire prime-time series on this topic locates it within the limited body of programming that can be characterized as feminist television. However, *SVU*’s depictions mark a new stage in the trajectory of televisual feminism. Analysis of the first five seasons of *SVU* suggests that its representations of rape facilitate a feminism that is markedly different both from the lifestyle feminism that dominated 1970s and 1980s prime-time entertainment and the postfeminism of the 1990s. We will show that, in a seemingly contradictory move, *SVU* storylines couple feminist premises and assumptions with an indictment of so-called female traits.

The storylines on *SVU* thematize and elaborate key elements of feminist understandings

of sexual violence. However, paradoxically, this feminist take on the subject of rape is not carried through in *SVU*’s treatment of women. Some of the storylines condemn aspects of feminine behavior and character, including empathy and intuition. Female characters seldom can or do form bonds with each other. Female criminals are manipulative and use relationships to harm others; numerous storylines explore narratives of moral depravity and extreme violence on the part of women. While criminal women are nothing new in popular cultural products, *SVU*’s particular construction of the dangerous woman takes an unusual turn. The criminal women on *SVU* use their power in the domestic realm to harm those closest to them, particularly their own children. Their criminality is often linked with misguided maternalism. We contend that the feminist elements of the storylines appear primarily in the depiction of sexual assault; at the level of the deep structure the narratives articulate an anxiety about feminine characteristics and the power women possess within the private sphere. Thus, in *SVU* narratives the home—the primary arena of women’s activities and the site of the feminine qualities of nurturing, caregiving, and affect—is presented repeatedly as the site within which a dangerous maternal instinct motivates women to commit heinous crimes. . . .

SVU’s claims of feminism are encouraged by press quotes given by the show’s cast. After completing two months of victim advocate training with the Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program at Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City, Mariska Hargitay told reporters she hoped to incorporate the perspectives of the police and of victim advocates (Beck & Smith, 2003). Hargitay is known for her work with rape survivors and for her “Joyful Heart” foundation, which Hargitay’s website indicates is “committed to helping victims of rape and sexual assault heal—mind, body, and spirit” (<http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/>). Like other cast members, Hargitay emphasizes the show’s commitment to realistic representations of sexual assault and to

presenting victim/survivor perspectives. One news article noted her assertion that *SVU* writers "don't try to sensationalize the stories," and quoted her comment that "rape . . . is not about sex, it's about anger and violence towards women, and we really go into what that's all about" (Fidgeon, 2003). Her character is often regarded as a feminist heroine. For example, a *New York Times* television review noted that her character is one of just a few who "mirror the feminist ethos of the past—dedicated, seasoned, and tough" (Stanley, 2005). Reporters also cite Hargitay's volunteer work outside the show to emphasize the commitment of both *SVU* the program and Benson the character to victims' perspectives and experiences. . . .

Demystifying Rape Myths

SVU's feminist depiction of rape is clearest when the episodes are viewed cumulatively. Following a trend since the late 1980s, *SVU* does not objectify sexual assault victims. The series rarely depicts the sexual assault itself, thus omitting titillating and objectifying details common in previous media representations. The majority of storylines track events after a rape so the sexual assault itself remains beyond the diegetic space of the series. This "post-rape" narrative strategy permits *SVU* to sidestep the problematic of rape's resistance to representation (Bal, 1992). Simultaneously, by showcasing women who survive their sexual assaults *SVU* asserts a key feminist idea: There is life after rape—that is, the raped woman is a survivor with agency (Rajan, 1993).

While the series, in title and content, pays silent homage to the achievements of the women's movement of the 1970s, storylines are more overt in highlighting the rape law reforms initiated by feminists. *SVU* also underscores the continuing shortcomings of the judicial system. *SVU* episodes often are limited to investigation of the crime and apprehension of the criminal. That said,

storylines that include a trial segment often underscore the juridical hurdles that preclude more systematic prosecution of criminals. For example, some episodes exploring the legal definition of consent emphasized how slippery the term becomes during trial. The episode "Consent" featured a female college student who was raped while under the influence of a date rape drug. The rapists were exonerated after the lawyer exploited the murky definition of consent. Other episodes highlighted definitions of statutory rape as well as more complicated ethical dimensions of consent. In "Waste," detectives pondered the possibility of filing a rape charge when a comatose patient was suddenly discovered to be six weeks pregnant. The episode parsed the meaning of consent in a complex manner by introducing a subplot where the fetus was aborted, but the patient's mother filed charges since she did not consent to the termination of the pregnancy. Some storylines showcased the troubling questions of who can press charges and who can offer evidence in rape cases, while other episodes highlighted how often rapists invoke the spousal confidentiality clause to halt the disclosure of crucial evidence. In each of these instances, *SVU* episodes revealed some of the rape law reforms such as rape shield laws, but also gave voice to feminist concerns about the lacunae that remain.

The absence of on-screen depictions of sexual assault and the critique of existing legal practices are the two predominant axes along which *SVU* introduces feminist understandings of sexual assault into the arena of prime-time entertainment. Even as these feminist insights are introduced unproblematically as a meta-discourse, individual episodes spell out more carefully the numerous rape demystification strategies that have been central to the women's movement. Most significantly, storylines highlight myths and misunderstandings that continue to surround the topic of sexual assault.

Feminists have insisted on dismantling the categories of "good" and "bad" victims that have dominated common

feminist in that it shows the difficulty in prosecuting rape

(*)

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sense (and media) definitions of the crime (Benedict, 1992). Unequivocally asserting that consent—rather than the conduct of the victim—is central to definitions of rape, SVU narratives repeatedly showcase assaults on prostitutes. In "Hysteria," an African-American teenager's rape and murder was treated lightly by police officers who assumed she was a prostitute. SVU detectives, however, managed to set the record straight, tracking down her murderer, a policeman, and unraveling the unsolved murders of at least 18 prostitutes. Storylines have presented the rape of police officers. While most victim-survivors are depicted as "normal" everyday people, some episodes have centered on "sexually adventurous" women. The detectives might make awkward jokes about these women's kinky sexual habits, but they do not discount the possibility of sexual violation. SVU narratives repeatedly declare that a person's sexual practices must not be used to undermine the person's credibility. The series rejects the assumption that only virtuous and sexually chaste women can be violated.

Apart from showcasing a range of survivor-victims including gay men and an MTF transsexual, storylines have contested the myth that women are assaulted when they are alone in "unsafe" public places. SVU narratives have depicted the sexual assault of women in public and private spaces with equal levels of complexity. "Remorse" depicted an attractive reporter who was raped by two strangers in an abandoned swimming pool. "Contact" provided a different valence to the term "public space" with the rapist assaulting women in crowded subway cars. Other SVU episodes featured assaults in "safe spaces" such as the home. "Limitations" tracked a serial rapist who attacked women in their beds and used a hair dryer as a "fake" gun, while "Disappearing Acts" featured an executive raped in her office. Thus the series does not categorize public and private spaces as safe or unsafe. By insistently inscribing the presence of sexual

assault in all spaces, perpetrated by strangers and acquaintances, the series helps forward a pivotal feature of feminist definitions of rape.

As the key female protagonist, Benson is a singular figure through which the show espouses identifiably feminist attitudes toward rape and police work. When a reporter Benson dates said he would like to "playfully" re-enact the subway rapes they had been discussing, Benson's reaction was swift and categorical. After telling the reporter his suggestion was disgusting, she locked herself in the bathroom with the instruction that he'd better be gone when she returned. The scene provided an unambiguous model for dealing with unwanted sexual behavior. Likewise, when a vice cop remarked that prostitutes cannot really be raped, Benson made clear that she did not mind offending him to make explicit her belief that the definition of rape does not depend on a victim's identity or profession. In "Limitations," she was angered by a retired SVU detective whose failure to document and take seriously a rape claimant's information resulted in multiple repeat offenses by a perpetrator at large for years. When the retired detective said it was "clear" that the alleged victim was just fantasizing about the rape, Benson confronted him with his sexism and incompetence and stomped away in disgust. The scene clearly differentiated between the traditional police view of rape and Benson's more feminist understanding, clearly taking a side in her favor.

The storylines also work to demystify the black male rapist myth. Walk-on characters often include interracial couples, heterosexual and gay; but rarely are people of color depicted as assailants (and often these are foreigners). Several narratives raised the prospect of the black male rapist. Inevitably, though, once arrested, the black male was found innocent, thus highlighting how racist assumptions of criminality shape policing practices. For instance, a black athlete was initially assumed to be the rapist in "Sophomore Jinx," but the narrative instead

offered an eloquent assessment of the stereotypes and racist assumptions that shape the everyday lives of African Americans. People of color are rarely depicted as criminals in interracial crimes. This, too, is a departure ~~from the history of popular culture representations.~~ The series also manages to render visible the victimization of women of color. In storylines featuring interracial couples the victim-survivor is always a woman of color. Perhaps these racialized depictions of criminality and victimization might be shaped by the network's standards department (Gitlin, 1983). In any case they help articulate concerns of feminists regarding the ways in which fears of black male sexuality have shaped cultural definitions of sexual assault (Brownmiller, 1975; Davis, 1978) and of critical race theorists, who highlighted the historical silencing of black female victimization. SVU's depiction of racialized victims thus helps correct the dominant tropes of black femininity in popular culture (Collins, 2005; Crenshaw, 1995).

SVU offers an unequivocally feminist understanding of sexual assault in its depiction of power imbalances as causing rape. Thus, while the majority of the episodes in the first season focused on the victimization of "classic" powerless subjects—women and children—storylines have increasingly drawn attention to other violated bodies, those gendered subjects who occupy the space of the female body in "rape scripts" (Marcus, 1992). Several SVU narratives featured the rape of men—heterosexual and gay—in a manner akin to that of their female counterparts, highlighting how the broader social climate of homophobia helps render this particular brand of sexual assault either invisible or sensational. In effect, the series does not prioritize the victimization of one sex over the other. Rather, it asserts that sexual violence pivots on power imbalances.

Portrayals of perpetrators of sexual assaults are as heterogeneous as the victim-survivors. They include authority figures (judges, doctors, and police officers),

working-class men, those that are "mentally retarded," and felons. SVU storylines have depicted men and women as child molesters, but only once were women presented as rapists. In "Ridicule," three women raped a male stripper; they were not prosecuted for this crime, although one of them was convicted of murder. This ecumenical presentation of sexual assault criminals echoes the feminist slogan that rape is not sex but is the assertion of power.

SVU storylines often go beyond offering an individual-centered explanation for sexual assault. They reiterate feminists' claim that violent masculinity is facilitated by ^{violent} ^{masculinity} society at large. Dworkin (1976), Griffin (1986), MacKinnon (1987), and other scholars have identified an interlocking web of social factors—such as the prevalence of pornographic representations that perpetuate the sexual objectification of women—as constituting a climate that makes possible men's assault of women. Storylines point out factors such as pornography, beauty pageants, and an overall "sexual objectification of women" that promote a rape culture. Thus, for instance, "Care" explored how young boys might learn and replicate the misogyny depicted in video games. "Appearances," featuring a 10-year-old beauty pageant participant, indicted the broader social milieu that normalizes the sexual objectification of all females, young and adult. Several SVU storylines evocatively described the complicated manner in which female college students are victimized by fraternity culture and institutional practices that facilitate the expression of male violence.

The New Televisual Feminism

Within these feminist elements, however, is enfolded a demonization of feminine characteristics. We do not assume that televisual representations should follow or develop only one perspective on controversial issues

demonization of feminine characteristics.

related to rape and sexual assault, or even of women. *SVU*'s depictions of violent and criminal women are not necessarily unrealistic or inherently anti-feminist. We recognize that competing elements and themes, as well as a range of reading positions, characterize televisual detective fiction. Nonetheless, we find that *SVU*'s representations of violent women present female power in the domestic sphere as not only dangerous, but as a cause of crime in general. Having analyzed the specific ways that *SVU* tells the stories of criminal women, we offer below some instances that highlight how the narratives castigate feminine characteristics even as the episodes adhere to a feminist understanding of sexual violence.

SVU's strategy of granting legitimacy to some feminist ideas about rape while subtly condemning feminine characteristics is exemplified in the character development of Detective Elliot Stabler. A proto-feminist family man, Stabler has from the first season been seen as encountering the limits of his male-centered understanding of sexual assault. With the assistance of his female partner he realizes a key feminist insight that sexual crimes often defy rationality. This process of coming into consciousness was demonstrated in *SVU*'s debut episode, "Payback." This storyline drew Stabler and Benson into a gruesome investigation of a cab driver who was posthumously castrated. The forensic trail allowed the detectives to identify the taxi driver as a Serbian war criminal who had committed numerous atrocities, including participation in rape camps.⁴ The detectives eventually located three survivors of the rape camps who now resided in New York City, two of whom collaborated to murder the taxi driver/war criminal. Stabler pursued the rule of law; he insisted that the two women be prosecuted for murder. However, Benson used the women's narratives to make the case that such acts of violence are the only recourse available to women victims of civil war atrocities, in the absence of viable international institutions of justice. While

Stabler never abandoned his faith in U.S. law and order institutions, by the narrative's end he showed remorse because one of the accused women committed suicide and the other was imprisoned.

Through similar narrative strategies, Stabler became the vehicle for the enunciation of a nuanced feminist idea. He often understands the cases he is investigating through a connected mode of reasoning reminiscent of Gilligan's (1982) understanding of female knowledge acquisition patterns. Stabler's professional successes do not always stem from a rule-orientation. Rather, the male detective arrives at a better and more accurate sense of sexual crimes when he imagines one of his four children in the place of the actual victims. For instance, in "Or Just Look Like One," a storyline about the rape and murder of teenage models, Stabler understood, with Benson's prompting, that they were not investigating a "simple" crime. Rather, he better understood the rape culture engendered by the beauty business in coming to terms with his older daughter's struggles with her body image. In particular, Benson instructed Stabler on the stakes women have in their looks, and the anger and insecurities that follow the loss of one's looks. Armed with this knowledge the detectives tracked down the criminal, a former female supermodel.

While the main storyline in this episode elaborated on the unrealistic body image promoted by the fashion industry, a secondary storyline depicted Stabler comprehending his daughter's battles with anorexia only after he recognized the physical, psychological, and material price the cult of thinness exacts from women. *SVU* storylines repeatedly present Stabler as blurring the public and domestic realms in the sense that his professional conduct is informed by insights from the domestic realm. This narrative choice underscores a key feminist idea that separating the public and private arenas is an untenable ideological device. Notably, *SVU* enacts a

gender role reversal in articulating this idea. Stabler is presented repeatedly as a concerned father who is successful in his detective work when he projects his children as victims of the crimes he is asked to pursue. While other television shows deprecated female characters who cannot separate their public conduct from the domestic realm, *SVU* has normalized Stabler as a concerned father who brings his domestic life and concerns into the workplace. Benson, meanwhile, maintains a rigid separation of the two arenas. She is rarely shown outside the professional realm; often she is depicted as having no private life.

The proto-feminist gestures enacted by Stabler's character, however, also impede his work. Understanding cases by imagining his children in the place of the victims makes Stabler too emotionally invested in his cases. For instance, in "Wanderlust," Stabler was convinced that a teenage girl must be a victim of sexual crime. Picturing his teenage daughter at the crime scene, he refused to follow Benson's hunch that the teenager was the murderer. It was left to Benson to explain that young teenagers can fall in love with father figures and commit crimes of passion. Benson finally convinced Stabler that all adolescent girls are not innocent and always-already victimized. Thus, Stabler's tendency to see his job through the prism of his family often hinders his work. Stabler is blinded by his concern for his family and his identification with women. Stabler's feminine characteristics of empathy and emotionality prevent him from apprehending female criminality.

Since the 1970s, feminists have worked actively with the police to alter the ways in which rapes are investigated, including by forming special victims' units, and ensuring that detectives are less skeptical and cynical about women's rape claims. So, it is striking that *SVU* has featured a number of storylines with false rape charges. We do not question the possibility of false rape claims but draw attention to the cultural work accomplished

by the many storylines that focus on women who fabricate rape charges. In the series as a whole, survivors are relatively rare, since most victims die during or after their attacks; this narrative strategy enables *SVU* to avoid titillating representations of rape and to concentrate on the aftermath. Nevertheless, the fact that *SVU* storylines position several survivors as false claimants of rape makes this a provocative and weighted strategy, one that cannot be dismissed as a twist intended to produce a "fresh" angle.⁵ Often the most eloquent survivors, those who can coherently and poignantly reconstruct their assault and the trauma they have experienced, turn out to be dissemblers. The false rape episodes are never depicted as "imagined" assaults; rather, the women are portrayed as maliciously and willfully fabricating the false charge. The female claimant's manipulative staging of false crimes, her ability to wield dangerously controlling interpersonal power over accomplices, and efforts to fool detectives become the focus of these storylines. . . .

Women as Victimizers

We have identified an archetypal "family" scenario where anti-women sentiments are present in the deep structure of the narrative. These stories center on the recurrent manifestation of what we call the monstrous maternal. Since these scenarios draw attention to the family as a site of violence, at first glance these storylines appear to articulate feminist concerns about a patriarchal space where male power is exercised and sometimes abused. Yet the limits of the detective genre come into visibility in these narratives, which tend to reflect an anxiety about feminine qualities and women's power.

During the first five seasons, numerous storylines depicted families that produce criminal children, or couples without children who are the source of crimes. When all of the "damaged families" narratives are totaled, over 40 episodes (approximately

one third of the episodes aired in the first five seasons) focused largely on family problems that result in crime. With a few notable exceptions that featured innocent victims who cannot ultimately be helped by law and order institutions ("Wrong is Right" centered on a young boy adopted by a pedophile; in "Disrobed" a judge abused domestic violence survivors and then extorted them), the direction of cause and effect in nearly all of these suggests that damaged families create damaged individuals who become criminals. The episodes reiterate a simple causal logic—that individual "sick" families cause social problems, and that "the system" fails some families that it should help. The dysfunctional family is a cause of crime, rather than the symptom or result of larger institutions and social problems. In *SVU* narratives, mothers often are either criminals in their own right or they cause the criminal behavior of their children. *SVU* women misuse their domestic power in the commission of crime as often as men do. Women's abuse of their power in the domestic realm is presented as more dangerous in its physical immediacy as well as more psychologically damaging than that of men. Bad mothering is much more frequently depicted as the cause of criminal behavior by adult children than is bad fathering.

The Monstrous Maternal

In *Motherhood and Representation* (1992) Kaplan identified two primary—and predominating—types of "bad" or "evil" mothers in popular culture. The so-called "fusional" mother is the "possessive and destructive all-devouring one," while the second is over-indulgent and vicariously satisfies her own needs through the child (p. 47). These mothers "project on to the child [their] resentments, disappointments and failures for which the child is also to suffer" (p. 47). Kaplan explained that much

less attention has been given to abusive fathers than to abusive mothers because of prevailing mother-constructs dictating that mothers be gentle and self-sacrificing. "Their deviation is then all the more reprehensible" (p. 193). Men's/father's abuse is "more socially acceptable" (p. 193), because they are not held up to the same standard of gentleness and self-sacrifice. Kaplan added that mothers are usually "blamed as individuals, rather than blame being placed on social structures and governmental priorities" (p. 192). Although Kaplan is primarily referring to news coverage, her description of popular representations of abusive mothers is borne out in *SVU*'s ripped-from-the-headlines fictional world as well. Here, mothers commit a range of horrific crimes related to their maternal role (such as withholding food, failing to nurture, or psychologically manipulating their children). They are also implicated much more often than are fathers in the crimes of rapists, sociopaths, pedophiles, and a range of extreme criminals who are their children.

The numbers of abusive mothers and abusive fathers in the first five seasons of *SVU* are almost identical. We analyzed more than two dozen episodes featuring criminally insane, violent, or otherwise dangerous mothers, referred to here as monstrous maternal figures. The monstrous maternal involves women who fail in their parental roles so grievously as to cause serious harm or even death to their children or others. The monstrous maternal storylines contend that violent women are often more dangerous and harmful than male victimizers; mothers are implicated in crimes committed by their children, whereas fathers are implicated almost exclusively in psychological damage that harms the children.

Our concept of the monstrous maternal differs somewhat from Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine." Creed focused on the horror film genre. For example, her discussion of "Alien" treated non-human elements such as the Alien monster and its mode of attack as cases of the "monstrous

feminine." Often, women's sexuality is depicted as the underlying problem in horror films, revealing male fears of women's sexual power. Working from a psychoanalytic model in order to understand the relationships between the human and non-human in horror film, Creed focused on women as victims. Our "monstrous maternal," while she may pose as victim, is always the aggressor. However, with both concepts, the texts emphasize the threat posed to men by women, particularly mothers, and suggest that it is women who pose the real threat to the social order. In SVU, the monstrous mother particularly focuses on children or others under her care as her victims, but her crimes may also represent a misdirection of the maternal role.

In many episodes about dysfunctional families, mothers' crimes were violent and immediate. Three episodes centered on mothers who had murdered their own children, and two others involved mothers who either accidentally or sympathetically killed their own children. No episodes featured fathers who murder their own children (although in "Monogamy," a man attacked his wife and killed the fetus they conceived). In three episodes maternal figures (two mothers and a grandmother with full guardianship) murdered their children through some variation of Munchausen by Proxy syndrome, physically abusing or poisoning them secretly in order to gain sympathy as caretakers of sick children.

Mothers are frequently the perpetrators of ongoing violence, whereas fathers' abuse is usually located in the distant past. Significantly, female perpetrators often utilize the domestic sphere as their means of committing crime. In addition to committing straightforward physical abuse (in "Careless," a foster mother murdered a child in her care), women poison their children's food, commit psychological abuse by seducing or dominating their sons, fail to nurture and love their children, abandon sick children, and murder (others) to

assure their children's happiness. Women's crimes are thus associated with misdirections of caregiving (poisoning not nourishing, murdering to protect, abusing rather than loving). Women's crimes are generally motivated by greed, jealousy, competition, and materialism, while men's serious crimes are committed for simple pleasure and covering up sexual wrongdoing. The worst female criminals are nearly always mothers of some kind. . . .

Repeatedly, SVU's dysfunctional families present the monstrous maternal as resulting from a misguided sense of caring and nurturing or a pathological selfishness. The mother-child bond itself is presented as profoundly dangerous. Often the episodes do not feature women as mothers but surrogates who within the domestic sphere occupy the role of caregivers and nurturers. SVU episodes feature women criminals as loving grandmother, devoted wife, sister ("Painless" depicted a woman whose resentment against her own mother turned to sociopathy; she murdered dozens of elderly nursing home patients who, she recalled, "were all called mother"), or long-suffering mother. In "Sacrifice" a porn star mother played the part of rape victim while she framed her husband for murder and abandoned her daughter to pursue an acting career. In "Shaken," a single mother was overwhelmed by her infant daughter's crying and suffocated her. . . .

Feminism in a New Era

SVU departs from most other prime-time fare in several important ways. It fits solidly within the historically masculine detective genre while deliberately focusing on a subject of primary interest to women. It positions itself as a dramatic series with feminist sympathies, addressing a subject that was long a focus of feminist activism. It is uniquely issue-oriented, building its emotional and dramatic appeal from a

impt.
Mendare
often
Victims

political issue rather than focusing on an eponymous protagonist (such as *Cagney and Lacey*). *SVU* highlights power in gender relations, including within the family, and provides evidence of "rape culture" as a potential factor in the commission of the crime. Yet in many instances the real victims are men and patriarchal institutions. Enfolded in the feminist perspectives on sexual assault are problematic depictions of feminine characteristics. . . .

Summary

We argue that *SVU*'s co-dependent linkage of a critical view of feminine qualities with a feminist understanding of sexual assault and rape reform constitutes a new brand of televisual feminism, distinct from the lifestyle feminism of the 1970s and 1980s and the postfeminism of the 1990s. *SVU*'s misogynist feminism includes false claims of rape; negative portrayals of feminine characteristics such as intuition, emotion, and manipulation; criminal use of interpersonal power by women; and the figure of the monstrous mother. Feminine characteristics such as empathy, intuition, passion, and nurturance are deployed in the conduct of crimes, but even in these episodes that "criminalize" feminine characteristics, *SVU* maintains a feminist understanding of sexual assaults.

①

Summary

This self-contradictory double-movement comes to the forefront in episodes dealing with female criminality within the family. Episodes with female criminals not only inveigh against feminine characteristics such as nurturance, but also give voice to anxieties about women's power within the domestic sphere. The monstrous maternal storylines show *SVU* grappling with the limits of the detective-cop show genre. In this genre, traditionally associated with masculinity, the vilification of feminine qualities and the association of women with horrific crimes within the family counterbalances the feminist perspective presented in many episode narratives in relation to rape and rape reform. We contend that the cumulative effect of the anti-feminine traits makes the series appear more misogynist rather than feminist.

This new brand of televisual feminism may be spreading to other television genres, particularly those that have not traditionally been understood as "women's" genres (such as the soap opera) and those that have not historically been on the cutting edge of progressive politics (such as the situation comedy). Meanwhile, the new brand of televisual feminism emerging in crime dramas shows a retrenchment of a traditional gendered split between public and private spheres. Crime drama has drifted toward realism, including the inclusion of more and more powerful professional women in the public sphere. *SVU* is no exception. However, its construction of crime and criminals maintains a gender division between public and private spheres. Male criminality is portrayed primarily as an ambiguous, lurking threat from unknown strangers who attack from outside the family. Female criminality is primarily depicted as an insidious interpersonal dysfunction that destroys the family and society from within.

Notes

1. The *Law & Order* franchise pivots on storywriters' ability to cull news stories for ideas about crime and criminality. This "ripped-from-the-headlines" technique provides an aura of newness and contemporaneity. Simultaneously, the news origins of these storylines replicate journalism's reliance on the unique and the exceptional. Special victims units were added to real-world police forces starting in the late 1970s in response to feminist activists who vehemently decried the severe mishandling of all stages of rape investigation. See Fairstein (1993) for an insider's view on these units' functioning.

2. Several characters reprise roles from other series, such as Detective Munch from *Homicide* and Captain Cragen from the original *Law & Order* series. *SVU* relies on and plays on audiences' television archives—memories of past programs and surrounding discourses that frame

Image-Based Culture

Advertising and Popular Culture

Sut Jhally

Because we live inside the consumer culture, and most of us have done so for most of our lives, it is sometimes difficult to locate the origins of our most cherished values and assumptions. They simply appear to be part of our natural world. It is a useful exercise, therefore, to examine how our culture has come to be defined and shaped in specific ways—to excavate the origins of our most celebrated rituals. For example, everyone in this culture knows a “diamond is forever.” It is a meaning that is almost as “natural” as the link between roses and romantic love. However, diamonds (just like roses) did not always have this meaning. Before 1938 their value derived primarily from their worth as scarce stones (with the DeBeers cartel carefully controlling the market supply). In 1938 the New York advertising agency of N.W. Ayers was hired to change public attitudes toward diamonds—to transform them from a financial investment into a symbol of committed and everlasting love. In 1947 an Ayers advertising copywriter came up with the slogan “a diamond is forever” and the rest, as they say, is history. As an N.W. Ayers memorandum put it in 1959: “Since 1939 an entirely new generation of young people has grown to marriageable age. To the new generation, a diamond ring is considered a necessity for engagement to virtually everyone.”¹

This is a fairly dramatic example of how the institutional structure of the consumer society orients the culture (and its attitudes, values, and rituals) more and more toward the world of commodities. The marketplace (and its major ideological tool, advertising) is the major structuring institution of contemporary consumer society.

This of course was not always the case. In the agrarian-based society preceding industrial society, other institutions such as family, community, ethnicity, and religion were the dominant institutional mediators and creators of the cultural forms. Their influence waned in the transition to industrial society and then consumer society. The emerging institution of the marketplace occupied the cultural terrain left void by the evacuation of these older forms.

*institutional structure of consumer society
orients the culture*

From Jhally, S. (1990, July). Image-based culture: Advertising and popular culture. *The World and I*, pp. 506–519.

Information about products seeped into public discourse. More specifically, public discourse soon became dominated by the "discourse through and about objects."²

At first, this discourse relied upon transmitting information about products alone, using the available means of textual communication offered by newspapers. As the possibility of more effective color illustration emerged and as magazines developed as competitors for advertising dollars, this "discourse" moved from being purely text-based. The further integration of first radio and then television into the advertising/media complex ensured that commercial communication would be characterized by the domination of imagistic modes of representation.

Again, because our world is so familiar, it is difficult to imagine the process through which the present conditions emerged. In this context, it is instructive to focus upon that period in our history that marks the transition point in the development of an image-saturated society—the 1920s. In that decade the advertising industry was faced with a curious problem—the need to sell increasing quantities of "nonessential" goods in a competitive marketplace using the potentialities offered by printing and color photography. Whereas the initial period of national advertising (from approximately the 1880s to the 1920s) had focused largely in a celebratory manner on the products themselves and had used text for "reason why" advertising (even if making the most outrageous claims), the 1920s saw the progressive integration of people (via visual representation) into the messages. Interestingly, in this stage we do not see representations of "real" people in advertisements, but rather we see representations of people who "stand for" reigning social values such as family structure, status differentiation, and hierarchical authority.

While this period is instructive from the viewpoint of content, it is equally fascinating from the viewpoint of form; for while the possibilities of using visual imagery existed with the development of

new technologies, there was no guarantee that the audience was sufficiently literate in visual imagery to properly decode the ever-more complex messages. Thus, the advertising industry had to educate as well as sell, and many of the ads of this period were a fascinating combination where the written (textual) material explained the visual material. The consumer society was literally being taught how to read the commercial messages. By the postwar period the education was complete and the function of written text moved away from explaining the visual and toward a more cryptic form where it appears as a "key" to the visual "puzzle."

In the contemporary world, messages about goods are all pervasive—advertising has increasingly filled up the spaces of our daily existence. Our media are dominated by advertising images, public space has been taken over by "information" about products, and most of our sporting and cultural events are accompanied by the name of a corporate sponsor. There is even an attempt to get television commercials into the nation's high schools under the pretense of "free" news programming. Advertising is ubiquitous—it is the air that we breathe as we live our daily lives.

Advertising and the Good Life: Image and "Reality"

I have referred to advertising as being part of "a discourse through and about objects" because it does not merely tell us about things but of how things are connected to important domains of our lives. Fundamentally, advertising talks to us as individuals and addresses us about how we can become happy. The answers it provides are all oriented to the marketplace, through the purchase of goods or services. To understand the system of images that constitutes advertising we need to inquire into the definition of happiness and satisfaction in contemporary social life.

Ads don't just tell us about things but tell us how things are connected to our lives.

tell us about how we can become happy.

text based
↓
1920
integration
of people

Quality of life surveys that ask people what they are seeking in life—what it is that makes them happy—report quite consistent results. The conditions that people are searching for—what they perceive will make them happy—are things such as having personal autonomy and control of one's life, self-esteem, a happy family life, loving relations, a relaxed, tension-free leisure time, and good friendships. The unifying theme of this list is that these things are not fundamentally connected to goods. It is primarily "social" life and not "material" life that seems to be the locus of perceived happiness. Commodities are only weakly related to these sources of satisfaction.³

A market society, however, is guided by the principle that satisfaction should be achieved via the marketplace, and through its institutions and structures it orients behavior in that direction. The data from the quality of life studies are not lost on advertisers. If goods themselves are not the locus of perceived happiness, then they need to be connected in some way with those things that are. Thus advertising promotes images of what the audience conceives of as "the good life": Beer can be connected with anything from eroticism to male fraternity to the purity of the old West; food can be tied up with family relations or health; investment advice offers early retirements in tropical settings. The marketplace cannot directly offer the real thing, but it can offer visions of it connected with the purchase of products.

Advertising thus does not work by creating values and attitudes out of nothing but by drawing upon and rechanneling concerns that the target audience (and the culture) already shares. As one advertising executive put it: "Advertising doesn't always mirror how people are acting but how they're dreaming. In a sense what we're doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you." Advertising absorbs and fuses a variety of symbolic practices and discourses, it appropriates and distills from an unbounded range of cultural references. In

so doing, goods are knitted into the fabric of social life and cultural significance. As such, advertising is not simple manipulation, but what ad-maker Tony Schwartz calls "participation," with the audience participating in its own manipulation.

What are the consequences of such a system of images and goods? Given that the "real" sources of satisfaction cannot be provided by the purchase of commodities (merely the "image" of that source), it should not be surprising that happiness and contentment appear illusory in contemporary society. Recent social thinkers describe the contemporary scene as a "joyless economy,"⁴ or as reflecting the "paradox of affluence."⁵ It is not simply a matter of being "tricked" by the false blandishments of advertising. The problem is with the institutional structure of a market society that propels definition of satisfaction through the commodity/image system. The modern context, then, provides a curious satisfaction experience—one that William Leiss describes as "an ensemble of satisfactions and dissatisfactions" in which the consumption of commodities mediated by the image-system of advertising leads to consumer uncertainty and confusion.⁶ The image-system of the marketplace reflects our desires and dreams, yet we have only the pleasure of the images to sustain us in our actual experience with goods.

The commodity image-system thus provides a particular vision of the world—a particular mode of self-validation that is integrally connected with what one has rather than what one is—a distinction often referred to as one between "having" and "being," with the latter now being defined through the former. As such, it constitutes a way of life that is defined and structured in quite specific political ways. Some commentators have even described advertising as part of a new religious system in which people construct their identities through the commodity form, and in which commodities are part of a supernatural magical world where anything is possible with the

people construct their identities through commodity form.

What one has vs. what one is.
↓
today
↓
you are what you have

purchase of a product. The commodity as displayed in advertising plays a mixture of psychological, social, and physical roles in its relations with people. The object world interacts with the human world at the most basic and fundamental of levels, performing seemingly magical feats of enchantment and transformation, bringing instant happiness and gratification, capturing the forces of nature, and acting as a passport to hitherto untraveled domains and group relationships.⁷

In short, the advertising image-system constantly propels us toward things as means to satisfaction. In the sense that every ad says it is better to buy than not to buy, we can best regard advertising as a *propaganda* system for commodities. In the image-system as a whole, happiness lies at the end of a purchase. Moreover, this is not a minor propaganda system—it is all pervasive. It should not surprise us then to discover that the problem that it poses—how to get more things for everyone (as that is the root to happiness)—guides our political debates. The goal of *economic growth* (on which the commodity vision is based) is an unquestioned and sacred proposition of the political culture. As the environmental costs of the strategy of unbridled economic growth become more obvious, it is clear we must, as a society, engage in debate concerning the nature of future economic growth. However, as long as the commodity image-system maintains its ubiquitous presence and influence, the possibilities of opening such a debate are remote. At the very moment we most desperately need to pose new questions within the political culture, the commodity image-system propels us with even greater certainty and persuasion along a path that, unless checked, is destined to end in disaster. . . .

The visual image-system has colonized areas of life that were previously largely defined (although not solely) by auditory perception and experience. The 1980s [saw] a change in the way that popular music commodities (records, tapes, compact discs)

music videos = commercials for records
little link b/w song and visual
 were marketed, with music videos becoming an indispensable component of an overall strategy. These videos were produced as commercials for musical commodities by the advertising industry, using techniques learned from the marketing of products. Viewing these videos, there often seems to be little link between the song and the visuals. In the sense that they are commercials for records, there of course does not have to be. Video makers are in the same position as ad makers in terms of trying to get attention for their message and making it visually pleasurable. It is little wonder then that representations involving sexuality figure so prominently (as in the case of regular product advertising). The visuals are chosen for their ability to sell.

Many people report that listening to a song after watching the video strongly affects the interpretation they give to it—the visual images are replayed in the imagination. In that sense, the surrounding commodity image-system works to fix—or at least to limit—the scope of imaginative interpretation. The realm of listening becomes subordinated to the realm of seeing, to the influence of commercial images. There is also evidence suggesting that the composition of popular music is affected by the new video context. People write songs or lines with the vital marketing tool in mind.

Speed and Fragmentation

In addition to issues connected with the colonization of the commodity image-system of other areas of social life (gender socialization, politics, children's play, popular cultural forms), there are also important broader issues connected with its relation to modes of perception and forms of consciousness within contemporary society. For instance, the commodity information-system has two basic characteristics: reliance on visual modes of representation and the increasing speed and rapidity of the

images that constitute it. It is this second point that I wish to focus on here. . . .

The visual images that dominate public space and public discourse are, in the video age, not static. They do not stand still for us to examine and linger over. They are here for a couple of seconds and then they are gone. Television advertising is the epitome of this speed-up. There is nothing mysterious in terms of how it arose. As commercial time slots declined from sixty seconds to thirty seconds (and recently to fifteen seconds and even shorter), advertisers responded by creating a new type of advertising—what is called the “vignette approach”—in which narrative and “reason-why” advertising are subsumed under a rapid succession of lifestyle images, meticulously timed with music, that directly sell feeling and emotion rather than products. As a commercial editor puts it of this new approach: “They’re a wonderful way to pack in information: all those scenes and emotions—cut, cut, cut. Also they permit you a very freestyle approach—meaning that as long as you stay true to your basic vignette theme you can usually just drop one and shove in another. They’re a dream to work with because the parts are sort of interchangeable.”⁸

The speed-up is also a response by advertisers to two other factors: the increasing “clutter” of the commercial environment and the coming of age, in terms of disposable income, of a generation that grew up on television and commercials. The need for a commercial to stand out to a visually sophisticated audience drove the image-system to a greater frenzy of concentrated shorts. Again, sexuality became a key feature of the image-system within this.

The speed-up has two consequences. First, it has the effect of drawing the viewer into the message. One cannot watch these messages casually; they require undivided attention. Intensely pleasurable images, often sexual, are integrated into a flow of

images. Watching has to be even more attentive to catch the brief shots of visual pleasure. The space “in between” the good parts can then be filled with other information, so that the commodity being advertised becomes a rich and complex sign.

Second, the speed-up has replaced narrative and rational response with images and emotional response. Speed and fragmentation are not particularly conducive to thinking. They induce feeling. The speed and fragmentation that characterize the commodity image-system may have a similar effect on the construction of consciousness. In one series of ads for MTV, a teenage boy or girl engages in a continuous monologue of events, characters, feelings, and emotions without any apparent connecting theme. As the video images mirror the fragmentation of thoughts, the ad ends with the plug: “Finally, a channel for the way you think.” . . .

Sell emotion rather than product - no more reason why advertising

Notes

1. See Edward Epstein, *The Rise and Fall of Diamonds* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

2. This is discussed more fully in William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising* (Toronto: Nelson, 1986).

3. See Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

4. Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

5. Hirsch, *Social Limits*.

6. William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1976).

7. See Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) and John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (New York: Orbis, 1981).

8. Quoted in Michael Arlen, *Thirty Seconds* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 182.

Three Faces of Eva

Perpetuation of the Hot-Latina Stereotype in *Desperate Housewives*

Debra Merskin

One of most popular network television programs to come along in years, *Desperate Housewives* (DH), enjoys a viewership of more than 21 million women and men (Arthur, 2006, p. E5). In its 9:00 p.m. Sunday nighttime slot, DH presents the intimate lives of five attractive women living in a middle-to-upper-middle-class neighborhood somewhere in America. One of these women, Gabrielle Solis (played by Eva Longoria) is Latina. At first blush, hers appears to be a breakthrough role in terms of media representations of Latinas. Visibility as a lead character in a highly successful television program is a rarity for Latino women and for men. Unfortunately, however, a critical reading of the program shows that the opportunity to advance the image of Latinos is lost, as dialogue, the presentation of Gabrielle, and the off-screen life of Longoria fulfill Keller's (1994) tripartite typology of Latina stereotypes (Cantina Girl, Suffering Señorita, and Vamp). . . .

In a "cultural climate where Latinas are hot and hot Latinas are on fire," DH's Eva Longoria sizzles (Papps, 2005, p. 21). As Wisteria Lane's hoop-eared hottie, Gabrielle Solis, Longoria's role as well as her public personae consistently present the entire spectrum of the hot Latina stereotype.¹ Longoria's prime time pinup status and promotional positioning in magazines reinforce the already prominent, oversexed, under-dressed decisive and divisive character she embodies on DH. . . . The steamy similarity in character and promotion of Longoria/Solis is seamless. . . .

From Merskin, D. (2007). Three faces of Eva: Perpetuation of the hot-Latina stereotype in *Desperate Housewives*. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 18, 133–151. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Latina Stereotypes in U.S. Popular Culture

During the 1920s through 1940s, Latina stars such as Carmen Miranda broke through racial/ethnic barriers to celebrity and success in U.S. popular entertainment. Yet, the physical and performative requirements for success simultaneously established not only the Latina "look" in film, but also the look as a symbol of lower social class. Carmen Miranda ("the lady in the tutti-frutti hat"), Dolores del Rio, and Lupe Velez (the "Mexican Spitfire"), projected not only exotic, inviting, and flamboyant sexuality, but also a particular social class look derived from a perceived ethnicity. In 1945, Carmen Miranda, for example, was America's highest paid woman (O'Neil, 2005). Her fame, however, carried a high price, as fruit-fetted hats, an accent thick as picante, and ever-zanier roles undermined whatever strides she had taken for Latinas in Hollywood (O'Neil, 2005). . . .

Stereotypical behavioral characteristics assigned to Latinas include "addictively romantic, sensual, sexual, and even exotically dangerous" (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 125), self-sacrificing, dependent, powerless, sexually naive, childlike, pampered, and irresponsible (Arredondo, 1991; Gil, 1996; King, 1974; Lott & Saxon, 2002). Stereotypical Latinas "all make good domestics," mispronounce words, speak Spanish, are Catholic, are impulsive dancers, and are known for "cooking up a spicy storm" (Cofer, 2005, p. 247)—not only in a culinary sense. Comprised of "bright colors, rhythmic music, and olive or brown skin," Latina tropicalism erases differences between specific Latino groups and conflates characteristics of people from African, Caribbean, and Latin American cultures into a single, pan-Latino/a identity (Guzman & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). . . .

Keller (1994, p. 40) organized these stereotypes under three categories which "epitomize the range of representations of women in Hispanic" and Anglo television and film.

1. *Cantina Girl*. "Great sexual allure," teasing, dancing, and "behaving in an alluring fashion" are hallmark characteristics of this stereotype. She is most often represented as a sexual object, a "naughty lady of easy virtue" (p. 40).
2. *Faithful, Self-Sacrificing Señorita*. This woman usually starts out good, but goes bad by the middle of the film or television program. This character realizes she has gone wrong, and is willing to protect her Anglo love interest by placing her body between the bullet/sword/posse/violence intended for him.
3. *Vamp*. Whereas Cantina Girl is most often presented physically as an available sexual object, the Vamp uses her intellectual and devious sexual wiles to get what she wants. She often brings men to violence and enjoys doing so. She is a psychological menace to males who are ill equipped to handle her.

Keller (1994) noted that the three major stereotypes function mainly in relationship to an Anglo love interest. Sex, passion, manipulation, and physical beauty are common to each of the characters, who are coded with particular types of clothing, postures, motivations, speech, and behavior. This portrait epitomizes stock Latina attributes that set the stage for the character of Gabrielle to appear (to Anglo audiences) as natural.

Although all of the women on *DH* are, in some way, sexual, Gabrielle's libido is on fast-forward in a way different from the highly sexual Edie, for example. Susan (Teri Hatcher) is meek; Lynette (Felicity Huffman), mother of four, avoids sex so as not to get pregnant again; and Bree (Marcia Cross), described as "Martha Stewart on steroids" is repressed. Edie (Nicollette Sheridan) is single and uses sex to get what she wants in a somewhat mindless and obvious manner,

whereas Gabrielle is tactical, risky, and sensual (shown in her bra and panties or tiny teddies) and iconicized in the larger-than-life portrait that hangs above the Solis's fireplace.

The character Gabrielle and the actor Eva Longoria present a mediated, pan-ethnic identity in the process of "tropicalization" (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997). Both the role and the public appearances are consistent with one another. Through these representations, both as character and celebrity, Gabrielle/Eva becomes a key tropicalizer, embodying panethnic traits of *Latinidad* that draw from and affirm dominant stereotypes of *Latina-ness*. . . .

Spicy Paella

Most of the characters on *DH* enter *tabla rasa*. In nearly every episode, drop by delicious drop, the characters' personalities blossom, their pasts are slowly revealed, and, however tarnished, their true natures shine through.

In the show's pilot (Cherry & McDougall, 2000) episode, Whiteness is established as the central signifier of culture on Wisteria Lane. In this episode the viewer first meets Gabrielle Solis, as the camera pans to her from a handsome Hispanic man we later come to know as her husband, Carlos. In a skin-tight, slinky black dress, stunning jewelry, and spiky high-heeled shoes, Gabrielle carefully navigates the front steps, all while carrying a steaming dish. Gabrielle and Carlos are on their way to a wake for a friend (Mary Alice) who committed suicide (she becomes the disembodied, omniscient narrator/voice over for the show). The omniscient narrator (Mary Alice) introduces Gabrielle to the audience this way: "Gabrielle Solis, who lives down the block, brought a spicy paella."

In this introductory scene, we learn a lot about Gabrielle. She is immediately constructed as *Latina* in her dress, mannerisms,

and by the food she contributes to the wake. We learn she married Carlos not out of deep love, but for economic reasons. That fact is no secret to Carlos who is well aware of, and takes seriously, this arrangement and his power to control it. Mary Alice tells the viewer, "Since her modeling days in New York, Gabrielle had developed a taste for rich food and rich men." We quickly learn that Gabrielle quit her high fashion modeling career (a form of bodily selling), with the understanding that Carlos would keep her bejeweled, pampered, and wanting for nothing. In return, she sleeps with him, makes herself available, and, because of her good looks, is an asset in his business dealings in the (implied) Anglo world. The audience is told, "Gabrielle liked her paella piping hot. However, her relationship with her husband was considerably cooler."

Gabrielle is Carlos's property. More than a trophy wife, more than arm candy, Gabrielle makes herself available for his use (at least initially). This arrangement is evidenced by his willingness to "pimp" her for his own gain, and her willingness to go along with it. As a *Cantina Girl*, she knows what she's got, and as a *Vamp*, she works it to her advantage. For example, before a party with one of his important clients, Gabrielle shouts that Carlos cannot order her around or force her to go:

Carlos: "It's business. Tanaka expects everyone to bring their wives."

Gabrielle: "Every time I'm around that man, he tries to grab my ass."

Carlos: "I made over \$200,000 with him last week. If he wants to grab your ass, you let him."

Gabrielle has mixed feelings about their agreement and how things are turning out in her life. Later in the same episode, Gabrielle tells Carlos she hates the way he talks to her, to which he replies, "and I really hate that I spent \$50,000 on a diamond necklace that

you couldn't live without. But I've learned to deal with it." When Carlos apologetically gives Gabrielle a convertible with a big red ribbon on it, she says, "Carlos, what have you done?" He replies, "I saw it when I drove by the dealership. I thought, 'Gabrielle would look so beautiful in this.'" "Carlos!" she exclaims, playfully shoving him. Mary Alice's narration tells us "Gabrielle could see what this gesture had cost Carlos so *she responded the only way she knew how*" [italics added]. The scene ends with Gabrielle, in Cantina fashion, kissing Carlos, jumping up, and wrapping her legs around him. . . .

"To-be-looked-at-ness" is an important aspect of the construction of Gabrielle (Mulvey, 2001, p. 397). Her body is a central marker of Latinidad conflated with sexuality; therefore, her clothing is always bright and tight fitting, for example, to show off her toned and lithe body in a way that has "strong visual and erotic impact," connotes availability, and exudes willingness (p. 397). In Episode 17 ("Children Will Listen"), Gabrielle's priorities are reasserted: "There were many things Gabrielle Solis knew for certain. She knew red was her color. She knew diamonds went with everything, and she knew men were all the same."

The Cantina Girl in Gabrielle thrives on, and feels validated by, attention to her appearance. In nearly every episode she is shown working out, or on her way to, or back from, doing so. While Gabrielle wants her affair with John, her 17-year-old "gardening toy boy lover" (Papps, 2005, p. 21), to be a secret, she does not mind attention and admiration from others. For example, in Episode 4, she asks John, "Why are your friends staring at me? Did you tell them about us?" John exclaims, "No! They're staring because they think you're hot." Gabrielle replies, smiling, "Oh! Okay!" (Cherry, Spezialy, & Melman, 2004). In Episode 5 (Cunningham, 2004), Gabrielle's vanity is apparent when she assures her friend, Susan, that she knows when people aren't looking at her;

"Honey, trust me. When they're not staring at me, I notice." . . .

Promiscuity, passion, sex, and risk taking are characteristics of Gabrielle as her psychic (Vamp) personality emerges (Keller, 1994). For example, Gabrielle finds her encounters with John exciting, not only for the sex, but also because she is fooling Carlos, and is stimulated by fear of his wrath. She spites Carlos and his money when she lures John into the kitchen (while Carlos is outside examining the lawn; Papps, 2005, p. 21). John watches Gabrielle take off her blouse and lean back seductively on the kitchen table. She tells him the table is hand-carved, imported from Italy, and cost Carlos \$23,000. John laughs and asks her, "So you wanna do it on the table this time?" Gabrielle replies, "Absolutely."

In order to keep her affair with John going, yet secret, Gabrielle vacillates, and sometimes sacrifices for Anglo love interest John (as Carlos suspects it is not the garden John is tending). In the middle of the Tanaka party, for example, Gabrielle-the-Vamp makes sure her husband is well supplied with alcohol, and rushes home to mow the lawn herself. Wearing an elegant evening gown and spiky high heels, the Suffering Señorita pulls the lawnmower out of the garage and, under cover of darkness, frantically mows, rushes back to the party, no worse for wear (except for the telltale leaf she removes from her hair, moments before returning, flirtatiously, to her husband's side). . . .

During the first season of *DH*, the Gabrielle Solis character transmogrifies from Cantina Girl, to Suffering Señorita, to Vamp. In the process, she does not lose any of the characteristics of the individual types: rather, as her character develops, the trio comes together, as she becomes a fully realized hot Latina stereotype.

In her public life, the actor Eva Longoria picks up where Gabrielle leaves off. In her off screen appearances, Longoria, the "Latina temptress" (Papps, 2005, p. 21), does little to dispel a view of her behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs as identical to Gabrielle's.

For example, in a magazine interview (in which she was later proclaimed the number 1 out of 100 sexiest women), Longoria said, "There's something very sexy about being submissive. Because your guard is down, you have to totally surrender to something like that" (Maximonline.com, 2003, ¶3). She plays the fantasy card when she admits she dresses a lot like her on-screen role: "I wear G-strings every day, all the time. I actually don't even own a full-bottom pair of underwear. I also love lingerie, and I love high heels, but I prefer total nakedness overall. That, to me, is so much sexier" (Maximonline.com, 2003, ¶3).

Because I'm Worth It

In late 1990s publicity, celebrity A-lister Jennifer Lopez stated she is an "actress who is Latin—not a Latin actress, as in one who just does Latina roles" (Beltrán, 2002, p. 77). While this might have been part of a public relations strategy to position Lopez as an actor, moving away from previous publicity about her buttocks,² Longoria, in contrast, presents a public and media persona consistent with her hot Latina *DH* role. In an interview, Longoria responded to the question "What's the best thing about being a woman?" in a way consistent with Keller's (1994) stereotypical "triplets" in her *DH* role:

Everything, everything. The sexiness that we get to exude. The femininity of having soft skin. The desire of always wanting to be pretty and put on make-up and wear heels. I love being a woman. I love shopping. I love wearing dresses and heels and jewelry. I love being sexy and feeling sexy. But the best thing about being a woman is the power we have over men. (oyemag.com, 2005)

In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Longoria was described as "the hottest, juiciest of the

Wisteria Lane housewives," who, "when she isn't shopping or mowing the front lawn in a pink party gown, she's doing the nasty with her seventeen-year-old hunk of a gardener." In response to the question, "What was the best sex you had all year?" she replies, in Gabrielle-esque vamp form,

Probably with my vibrator. I own two. I have the rabbit one, and I give that as a gift all the time to other girls for a birthday or the like. It's the best gift to give: an orgasm. And if I can't do it for ya, I'll give you the tools to succeed! I have one rabbit and a Pocket Rocket. (Hedegaard, 2005)

Longoria's sexy girl-ness transcends her role in *DH* in the advertising arena. Wearing a black skin-tight, criss-cross backed evening gown she longingly and liquidly lounges on a white bedspread, slithering forward and rolling from stomach to back, extolling the virtues of L'Oreal's VIVE shampoo. This commercial is the first among many she will do as the first and only Latina spokes model for the world's largest cosmetic company (Foster, 2005, p. 30), as she lends her name and body to the beauty product monolith's array of goods (L'Oreal, 2005). Longoria went with the company because, "L'Oreal is one of the few companies that really reflect my values. Their company philosophy and their legendary phrase 'Because I'm Worth It,' go hand-in-hand with who I am as a person. This is it, the best, the culmination of an amazing year" (Femalefirst.com, 2005).

Thirty-year-old Longoria "joins a bevy of beauties" who have contracted with L'Oreal, including Andi MacDowell, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jennifer Aniston (Fashionspot.com, 2005). Although Longoria may have followed Aniston's footsteps to the door of the house of L'Oreal, it was for Aniston's bedroom she volunteered her services. Intended as humor, in light of publicity surrounding the Jennifer Aniston/Brad Pitt split (allegedly over Aniston's unwillingness, and Pitt's desire, to have children), Longoria joined

other American women in donning a pink "I'll have Brad's babies" t-shirt. Friends and fans were shocked by Longoria's lapse in judgment. She later apologized for the display of poor taste and the insult to Aniston. What is interesting, however, is that Longoria was keeping in character by playing the happy-when-pregnant, hot Latina, Cantina Girl stereotype.

Longoria's public appearances do much to bolster her onscreen role. Voted by *Variety* as one of the "Ten New Faces of Fall" (quoted in torontofashion.com, 2004), she extends her seductive reach to daytime and evening (mostly female) viewing audiences, with an appeal (and giggle) that will inevitably include men. Good marketing? Sure. However, as predicted by Accumulation Theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998), the combination of on-screen, off-screen, and in-print activities work to reinforce the hot Latina stereotype. In an interview, in defense of her role and as a response to criticism of perpetuating Latina stereotypes, Longoria stated:

I don't think they're detrimental. It's great to be represented in any way. Ricardo Montalban said something about that in the documentary, *The Brown Screen*. He said, "What's wrong with being a Latin Lover? Why is that a bad stereotype? I consider that a compliment." Same thing with Latinas always being cast as the sexy girl. It's a good thing! (oyemag.com/eva.html, 2005)

Discussion

... Based on this analysis, the role of Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria) contributes to and perpetuates long-standing stereotypes of Latinas in American movies and television programs as identified by Keller (1994). Longoria's off-screen activities and antics further reinforce and conflate the character with the person. It is often difficult

to determine whether the media are referring to Longoria's character or to her as celebrity when they describe her as a "fire-cracker" (Fernandez, 2004, ¶32), a "hot tempered siren" (Wittstock, 2005, ¶12), and one of the "titular horny homemakers" (FHM.com, 2004, ¶1). Referring to Longoria's "coverage" in its October 2004 issue, FHM magazine states, "Given the theme of Eva's new show, it seemed only appropriate that the 29-year-old's FHM photo shoot involved doing domestic work in her delicates. 'It wasn't a new experience—that's standard operating procedure in my household,' she says. 'Who doesn't do housework in their underwear?'" (FHM.com, 2004). . . .

The representational politics of Gabrielle/Eva position the Latina character in a way that functions to provide justification for a narrow perception, resulting in a continuation of the hot Latina stereotype. This "mainstreaming" of stereotypical images exists in a climate that supports hegemonic ideals of Anglo (White) heterosexual, male privilege (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). As it largely remains unchallenged by alternative portrayals, the Hot Latina stereotype takes on the appearance of naturalness. . . . The character Gabrielle Solis and the actor Eva Longoria conflate in the public eye, as both on-screen and off-screen women are consistent with one another. If Anglos, by way of media-supplied information, come not to expect much of Latinas and, because of the function of internalized oppression, Latinas do not expect much for themselves, the cycle of oppression continues uninterrupted. . . .

Notes

1. In this chapter, the terms *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Latina* are used interchangeably as is consistent with marketing, media, and government terminology (Davila, 2002).

The Limitations of the Discourse of Norms

Gay Visibility and Degrees of Transgression

Jay Clarkson

Painful.

Both my partner and I are totally straight-acting, very masculine, and when we're in mixed company with someone who's . . . um . . . well, let's just say they open their mouth & their purse falls out, well, we get rather uncomfortable.

Case in point: a big get-together of a bunch of friends last year at the local Macaroni Grille (chain Italian restaurant). Thing is, this is suburban Detroit, not the Castro, and a table full of fourteen guys in a busy restaurant full of middle-class families might get noticed of its own accord!

Add in one of our friends, let's call him "Bill." Not his real name. Bill's 23, lives at home, has no responsibilities, and is finishing up interior design school. He's emaciated thin; we think he lives on ice chips, Dolce & Gabbana anything, and Swarovski crystal trinkets. Both he and another member of our crew decided that this would be the perfect place to turn up their flames from "dull glow" to "viewable-from-space." It was all I could do not to either 1. smack him or 2. flee the building.

Because my one pet peeve, more than anything else with regards to gay men (besides the idiots who believe that HIV is a curable disease and therefore don't use protection) are fags who don't recognize the conditions of their environment. There's a time to flame out (greeting friends in the gay bar) and a time to tone it down (the sideline at an NFL game). Boys who don't change their temperament in accordance with their conditions endanger themselves and those they're with, in my opinion. (roadster_guy)

At the heart of the politics of gay representation are two intersecting considerations: the meanings and functions of visibility, and the role of gender performance in our understanding of sexuality. This chapter continues the discussion of gay visibility and gender transgression that

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has emerged as a key concept in recent scholarship of GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) representation in the media. I explore the discourse of the discussion board of StraightActing.com, an Internet discussion board for self-identified straight-acting gay men, to demonstrate how current popular understandings of representational power create divisiveness among groups of gay men who seek to normalize a particular set of gender performances as acceptably gay, at the expense of other performances perceived as more transgressive. . . .

The discourse of visibility on StraightActing.com is useful because the online space functions for self-proclaimed straight-acting gay men to make themselves visible to other gay men. Their discussions include significant debate about the nature of their and other gay men's visibility, of which I have chosen a representative sample. Their discourse mirrors critical understandings of the power of visibility and gender transgression. They demonize an effeminate gay stereotype, which they perceive as dominating media representations of gay men, because they fear that it functions to construct a normative gay identity that is promoted by other gay men and can only be undone with increased visibility of straight-acting gay men. . . . Their argument assumes that transgressive gender performance, not just same-sex desire, is the root of antigay attitudes. Homophobia in this formulation is reduced to a fear of particular gender performances, and not a deeper cultural fear of same-sex attraction. The visibility of straight-acting gay men, or men who cannot be read as gay, may challenge the notion of a hegemonic and monolithic gay identity, but they reflect the historic need for the marginalized to remain obedient, silent, and invisible in order to be recuperated into dominant ideologies (Owen, Vande Berg, & Stein, 2007). I argue that for gay visibility to challenge the hegemonic gender regime, the acceptance of outspoken, disobedient, visible gay men and lesbians is necessary to raise acceptance of all gay people, including those who identify as straight acting, and to recognize the diversity of gay identities.

Conceptualizing Visibility

It is important to remember that visibility is not in itself an unproblematic concept. Peggy Phelan criticizes identity politics for its reliance on the assumption that a lack of media visibility of a minority group reflects and reproduces inequality, and accordingly, these groups should seek great power through increased visibility. Phelan has quipped, "If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western Culture" (Phelan, 1993, p. 10). She recognizes that equating visibility with power is problematic, for in its supposed promise of liberation it invites increased surveillance. . . . The notion that the power visibility promises may be reduced to quantity is nonsensical, since visibility is often used to signify deviance and not to promote tolerance (see, e.g., Sloop, 2004). . . .

Gay and lesbian media critics have long recognized that media visibility of gay men and lesbians often functions only to make a certain type of homosexual natural and normal (Battles & Hilton-Murrow, 2002; Dyer, 1977; Shugart, 2003). It is important therefore for critics to analyze gay and lesbian visibility to see how it is being used by heterosexual society to define homosexuality. . . . Despite the widely accepted notion that GLBTQ people turn to the media to understand homosexuality, there remains a relative void in research detailing the ways that actual gay people conceptualize visibility in the media or in actual social practice. It is important to look beyond merely examining media texts to determine how transgressive performances may be constructed, and to actually observe how these transgressive performances are read by those who oppose them. . . .

DEGREES OF TRANSGRESSION AND THE LIMITS OF NORMALIZATION

The passage from roadster_guy that begins this chapter reveals the tension over

gay visibility that exists even within gay communities.¹ In answering the question "How have your experiences with nelly men been," roadster guy blames those who are read as gay for their own oppression and advocates invisibility for gay men. He demonstrates a homophobic, but widely accepted and repeated, view: those who do not alter their behaviors to avoid the risk of offending potentially homophobic bystanders are responsible for any disciplinary action that those homophobes may choose to inflict. Furthermore, the fact that he would consider smacking his friend for displaying any sort of gender transgression reveals his reliance on blending into a presumably heterosexual environment at any cost, and his assumption that gender performance is an overtly agentic set of choices to be made.

Given roadster guy's obvious discomfort with Bill, even before he broadcast his flaming performance to space, it is unclear why Bill is his friend at all. His reaction does reveal how gender transgressors are disciplined differently than those who conform. Most importantly, it reveals that selective homophobia is alive and well within gay communities. It suggests that some gay men fear the gender performances they see as flaming, not only because they do not like them, but also because they fear what those performances may mean to straight people. However, it is these flaming gender performances which represent a heightened degree of transgression that, as the visibility of gay men grows, remains a barometer for gay rights and highlights how the gender and sex regime continues to operate even within gay communities. Potentially, as Halberstam (1998) argues, these transgressors are not simply saying no to the dominant gender regime, but are in fact saying "I don't care" to the system of power, and thus it is more difficult for disciplinary forces to cope with this transgression.

I submit "degrees of transgression" as a metaphor for discussing the political potential of rethinking "normalization" of gay visibility as "conventionalization." This phrasing should remind critics that "flaming gays" remain among the most marginalized members of society, even in some gay

communities. Even when these flammers are represented in the media, audiences, including gay men, often are positioned to laugh at gender transgression, not to identify with those who perform it. Furthermore, many assume that the presence of a flamer positions the reader to laugh at the transgression, even if the audience is positioned to identify with the transgressor. The flamer needs to be validated in media texts, and by media audiences, as a critical first step toward the acceptance of these gender performances as legitimate conventions of the larger and more diverse gay community....

Negating Transgression in Representations of Gay Pride

The limits of normalization and the fear of heightened degrees of transgression can be observed in the discourse of Straight Acting.com. Several of its members suggest that gay visibility would improve in quality if gay pride parades were abolished and gay men implemented a strategy of being "quietly gay":

I'm not sure gay pride is working. A gay author, Dan Savage, I think, suggested that once the disease is cured, the cure becomes toxic. Once the cancer is gone, the chemo will kill you. I think the Stonewall/Gay Pride movement was a necessary cure, and brought the gay world to people's attention. But I think that what was once the cure is now toxic. I see more and more of our rights taken away, and more hate crimes, because the flamboyant elements of the gay movement have remained in power after they have ceased to be effective, IMHO.²

I suggest a movement called "quietly gay." I think it's important for me to be out to the people closest to me, but as for the rest of the world, they can "do the math." I don't need to be vocal or up front with the world at large. And I think the world would be more accepting if we just lived our lives in our own

little world. I think that we are losing because people continue to shove their orientation in people's faces. I think a new vanguard of "normal" men living normal lives would help the movement more at this moment in time. Thought I'd toss that out for discussion. (James)

James is interpreting Dan Savage, a controversial gay columnist, correctly. Savage does argue that pride has outlived its usefulness and may be more of a hindrance than a help. The article that James is citing argues that gay pride functions to suggest that there is a unified gay community, and warns of the danger of assuming that all gay people look out for each other.

Of course, Savage is correct in asserting that not all gay people are allies, as the discourse of this Web site reveals; however, he is wrong to assume that we are at the point where a cure for societal homophobia is no longer needed. I am not arguing that pride is the solution to homophobia, but Savage's perspective that gay rights have been won is tragically optimistic and ignores the growing amount of antigay physical and political violence, as well as the overwhelming body of legislation that has passed to prevent GLBTQ people from enjoying equal access to citizenship.³

James, in his post above, reveals that antigay sentiment is still quite strong among large sections of the American population. However, James attributes this sentiment, and an increase in hate crimes, to the visibility of "flamboyant" gay people, and argues that we should move toward a gay identity that conforms to normative standards of gender identity while retaining non-normative sexual identities. His comments suggest that invisibility is his preferred strategy and that normalization of his particular gender identity is more important than the acceptance of other conventions of gay identity. James's insistence on reduced visibility for particular types of gay people does recognize that diversity exists, but his strategy of reduced visibility attempts to rhetorically douse those who perform higher degrees of transgression. . . .

James's perspective represents only one side of the debate about visibility on StraightActing.com. Xaphan is the first to challenge James's understanding of the power of gay visibility:

Ahh, but the chemo doesn't get all the cancer during the first treatment. You need to have repeated treatments and follow up to make sure it's gone. Pride is that treatment. And each year, society as a whole gets a little dose of Queer Chemo.

Pride in Boston started 35 years ago. Since that time we've become more visible, less discriminated against, have more rights, less fears, and now we can marry. We're getting to be cured of the homophobic cancer. Will it all go away? Nope. There are still people that think blacks should go back to Africa and women shouldn't be independent. But, can we improve conditions for a more equal world, yes.

So while Pride is seen by people with clouded vision (nice way of saying ignorant fools) as a show of flamboyance, it is in fact exposure, a dose of the variation of life. If Pride is a foolish display of homosexuality, then what of Mardi Gras, Carnival, and Spring Break. What do these things say of heterosexual people? What do they say of young people? And these are groups who don't require any visibility or more acceptance.

So Pride is the continuation of the homophobia chemotherapy. (Xaphan)

Xaphan recognizes that gay rights have increased since the inception of gay pride events, although whether this is as a consequence is impossible to determine. His comment reveals the assumptions of identity politics: that increased visibility results in increased power, which here is framed as acceptance and civil rights. More importantly, he reveals the power of exposing the invisible in order to challenge interpretations of the visible. His comparison of the heterosexual displays of Spring Break and Mardi Gras to the homosexual "flamboyance" of gay pride reveals the ways in

which homosexuality is seen and heterosexuality remains unmarked, because these expressions of heterosexuality are contextualized, and thus seen as only one convention of heterosexuality. Few complain about the display of heterosexuality during Spring Break, although some complain about its graphic nature. Furthermore, this distinction recognizes the diversity in heterosexual sexuality—not just their straightness, but the ways that they may employ their sexuality in public or in private. However, the assumption that Xaphan is revealing is that gay sexuality is defined for the public by the gay pride events: that the norm is public displays of sex and sexuality, not that these are indicative of a particular group within the gay community.

What the discourse about gay pride reveals is not that some of these men believe that visibility does not lead to social change, but instead that they see only specific types of representation leading to social change. The flaming performances that are traditionally associated with gay pride are rejected when James advocates that gay people should quietly emulate heterosexual relationships. In the following comment James elaborates on what “quietly gay” means to him. In doing so he assumes that one can be publicly gay without revealing the private desires that homosexuality entails:

For me, the couples standing in line to get licenses in San Francisco was a powerful, quiet witness. It said something strong and true about the gay experience, and didn't require any costumes. I'm not asking anyone to sit down and shut up—I'm thinking of becoming visible in a different set of roles. I don't think the public at large benefits from knowing about my private desires, but they can see me working for a candidate, cleaning up a park, being a churchgoer, etc., and do the math from the way I live my life. I think the last election has shown that rather than gaining us rights, the gay pride movement is galvanizing people against us. Showing that we are the same as everybody else, and living our lives with our orientation

blended in with the rest of the flavors of our lives, would do more to help the cause now, IMHO. (James) . . .

Conclusion

The important difference between norm and convention lies in the insistence on a plurality. However, the intragroup struggle over a dominant convention, revealed in the discourse of StraightActing.com, reveals the danger of the current conceptualization of visibility among gay men. The reliance on this discourse of normalization suggests that what media representations contribute to is a single norm for gay men, and all else are abnormal or less than acceptable. Formulating representational power as normalizing, and not conventionalizing, promotes divisiveness among members of the gay community, struggling over which of their identities may become normalized. Just as heterosexuality is not reduced to a single norm, with its recurring representation in MTV's variety of Spring Break specials and coverage of overt sexual display at Mardi Gras celebrations, homosexuality at gay pride parades may be thought of as contextualized within that moment. The displays of homosexuality are conventions that occur within a particular moment and do not represent homosexuality as a whole, and may not even represent the lives of those who engage in these displays at pride events. A discursive shift to conventionalization may reduce the intergroup struggle over who is represented, by assuming a wider range of degrees of transgression.

The discourse of media stereotypes of gay men reveals both pro- and anti-visibility perspectives. In their calls for inclusion, these men focus on inclusion for those men who adhere to the traditional and perhaps conventional expectations of male behavior. In this discussion group, these particular men want to see a change in the ways gay men are represented. They are angered by the seeming focus on feminine gay representations and want to shift the focus to gay men

who act just like “normal” heterosexual men, thus returning feminine gay men to a closet of symbolic annihilation. Indeed, they want to return to the privileged position of seeming to be just like heterosexual men, so that they can assume some of the power that this position entails. . . .

Some of these men, as well as some media critics, argue that increased visibility of straight-acting gay men has the potential to undo what they see as the negative consequence of the prevalence of effeminate gay stereotypes and those who uphold them. They fail to recognize the liberatory potential of representing higher degrees of transgression. While their argument seems to be that their increased visibility will lead to greater acceptance of homosexuals, they fail to acknowledge that the root of homophobia remains homosexuality. They seek to normalize gay men as “real men,” but their strategy for confronting homophobia is limited to challenging the conflation of gender and sexuality, and does not seek acceptance for those whose degrees of transgression are higher. It does not challenge the fear or hatred of gayness. . . .

Notes

1. StraightActing.com is a privately funded Web site for self-proclaimed straight-acting gay men that can be read by all, but users must register (at no cost) to post. The site is based around the discussion area called the Butch Boards, but also includes a series of straight-acting quizzes and, before a massive server crash in the summer of 2004, personal ads, home pages, and other services. The Butch Boards and the quiz have been restored, but unfortunately the previous content has been irreparably lost, and the discussion boards started anew early in October 2004. In June 2005, the Butch Board included 18 forums ranging from 41 to 310 topics in each. Overall, there were slightly less than 55,000 total posts, ranging widely in length and content. While the forum descriptions suggest that the discussion topics are well organized,

there is considerable overlap in topic area from forum to forum. As part of a larger study, I engaged all areas of the discussion board in order to avoid overlooking certain perspectives or favoring one forum's most active posters. This chapter focuses exclusively on the discourse of visibility in these forums.

2. IMHO is a common acronym for “In my humble opinion.”

3. Five more states voted to ban same-sex marriage in the 2006 election, bringing the total number to 24.

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