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What is This?

Nothing queer about queer television: televized construction of gay masculinities

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The longest-running gay character in American television is Will Truman, played by Erick McCormick on NBC's *Will & Grace* for eight seasons from 1998 until 2006. Will Truman is an attractive and successful Manhattan lawyer in his mid-thirties. However, the American public never saw Will Truman go to bed with another man. In addition, for most of those eight years, Will Truman was sitting by himself in America's prime-time network television gay bar. However, starting in 2003 American television witnessed the appearance of more audacious gay male characters, including a sitcom featuring a middle-aged gay couple with a daughter (*It's all Relative* on ABC), a dating reality show (*Boy Meets Boy* on Bravo) and a make-over show (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* on Bravo), in addition to the controversial drama *Queer as Folk*. According to the media-watch organization GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) the 2003–4 network prime-time line-up can be considered a breakthrough with eight leading gay characters, compared to five the three previous seasons (GLAAD, 2006). Gay characters, in particular gay males, started populating television dramas, situation comedies and reality shows.

The presence of homosexual characters in American television would seem to imply an endorsement of a liberal agenda of tolerance and inclusion of alternative lifestyles and sexual orientations. However, the perceived progressiveness of gays' sudden appearance on American television could be undermined if it responds to traditional norms of social relations. In her analysis of the television program *Ellen*, where comedian Ellen DeGeneres and her fictional character came out in 1997, Dow (2001) argues that increased visibility of gays and lesbians in the media does not always translate into social tolerance

or recognition, particularly because the fictional media narratives tend to emphasize the interpersonal issues of homosexuality and avoid the political ones. Shugart (2003) analyses the construction of gay identity of several male homosexual characters in popular films and television programs in the context of the gay male/straight female best-friends narrative. She argues that gay males are defined as privileged for their total access to women but as impotent for their homosexuality (2003: 88), a notion consistent with heterosexism. On the other hand, Meyer (2003) maintains that the best-friends narrative of *Will & Grace* provides a space to explore intimate issues of gay male characters outside the core friendship. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) analyse *Will & Grace* with regard to its dependence on traditional sitcom formulas and argue that the narratives diminish any of the show's potentially subversive themes.

Such unprecedented explosion of gay male characters in American television and the perceived liberalism of their representation require further examination. Queer theory and notions of hegemony applied to issues of gender, race and class provide this article's conceptual foundation. Using discourse analysis of television shows with leading gay male characters as its method, this study examines the dominant themes in the construction of gay male identity in American television. It addresses in particular whether the sudden increase of gay male characters and the perceived advancement in their representation challenge heteronormative notions of masculinity and hegemonic models of social relations. This article also discusses what has happened since the 'breakthrough' year of 2003 and the current state of queer television in America.

Hegemonic sexual identities

The debate over essentialism and constructionism is central to studies of human gender and sexuality. Essentialists believe that homosexuality is innate or biological and that gay identities can be traced back in history, while constructionists believe that a homosexual identity is a cultural product and a social construction. Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality and sexual definitions are created by society in order to repress individuals wishing to engage in behaviors that deviate from the heterosexual model. Queer theory is a radical area of study resulting from the development of feminist theories, gay and lesbian literary criticism, and Foucault's revolutionary ideas about sexuality and identity. The term 'queer' itself attempts to negate the notion of sexual identity, resulting as it did from post-structuralist debates that defy rigid definitions and categorizations (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory discusses how power operates with sexuality in contemporary society to define social and cultural norms. According to Brookey: 'a primary purpose of the critical application of queer theory has been to demonstrate how sexuality is culturally essentialized to inscribe heterosexuality as normal and all other sexualities as deviant' (1996: 41). Furthermore, queer studies propose that sexuality is not restricted

to heterosexuality or homosexuality, a binary system reinforced by hegemonic patriarchal societies, but is a more complex array of gender possibilities.

Queer represents a resistance to anything that is socially defined as normal, and in that sense queer may exclude some gay and lesbian practices that have a 'normative perspective' or may include other experiences that are not explicitly sexual (Jagose, 1996: 98). If queer is not linked solely to sexual objects and desires, it can be understood as a reaction to broader structures of social and cultural domination. Rather than coercion, social domination can be conceived as a more flexible system of normalization through social structures and cultural production. Gramsci's (1973) notion of hegemony shifts the focus of scholarly attention from explicit ideologies or agendas to the common-sense norms that influence everyday interactions and are taken for granted. Although Gramsci understood hegemony as part of the dynamic process of class struggle and domination, his ideas can inform other discussions of power regarding gender, race and sexuality. For example, Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as the institutions and practices that make heterosexuality privileged and therefore desirable (1993: 355). Social desirability gives heterosexuality its hegemonic dimension.

External hegemonic masculinity is defined as the patriarchal system where men dominate women, while internal hegemonic masculinity is defined as the domination of white heterosexual men over other men (Connell, 1992). In light of these definitions, homosexual men are neither participants nor beneficiaries of any kind of hegemonic masculinity. Demetriou challenges these definitions and argues that hegemony is not the privilege of white heterosexual men but rather manifests itself through different kinds of masculinities in order to assure the survival of the patriarchal system. He claims that the integration of gay male representations in diverse cultural practices can be understood as a gay masculinity that forms part of a contemporary 'hegemonic masculine bloc' (2001: 343). Along the same line, Ward (2000) says that popular representations of homosexual experience carry the assumption that gay males' interests are in line with those of lesbians, feminists, and other sexually and racially marginalized groups. She argues that the discourse of gay masculinities actually excludes and ignores concerns of other gender and sexual minorities. Ward (2000) calls this phenomenon 'queer sexism' of which gay white men would be active enforcers rather than victims.

Considerations of hegemony and sexual identities in queer media studies cannot be divorced from issues of class and race. Foucault (1978) argues that the real forces behind traditional values are economic, because the family represents the perfect unit to maximize consumption in capitalist societies. Chasin (2000) discusses how capitalism and consumerism have appropriated the American gay liberation movement with the consequent exclusion of those who do not fit the profile of the ideal gay consumer. Brookey argues that representations of homosexuals who hold traditional values are conceived as a way for heterosexual viewers to reflect their own experiences in

them, since 'representations of homosexual experience suggest homosexual men are worthy of validation in mainstream society if they follow the offered examples' (1996: 45). A contemporary critical analysis of gay male representations on television needs to be informed equally by notions of gender, sex, class and race.

Gay male identities on television

Queer media studies examine how the mass media, as a cultural and social institution, contribute to the maintenance of the sexual status quo expressed as the pre-eminence of heterosexuality in the representation of social interactions. A queer perspective in media criticism requires going beyond issues of numeric representation of gays and lesbian towards an analysis of the nature and complexity of such representations in the context of a broader notion of hegemony. Traditionally, mediated images of gays and lesbians have been analysed from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1992) and notions of invisibility and symbolic annihilation (Fejes and Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1991; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1992). Hanke used the term 'subordinated masculinity' (1992: 195) to describe the absence of gay male identities on television. However, since invisibility, at least of gay males, is no longer an issue in American popular media, an analysis of current mediated gay images is more in line with alternative definitions of hegemonic masculinity that incorporate issues of gender, race and class (Demetriou, 2001; Ward, 2000). Fejes (2000) suggests that representations of gay and lesbian identities in the mass media are occurring in a rather conservative period for American society and therefore are harmless to heteronormative values. Homosexual images are presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audiences by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy and stability. Most of the erotic connotations of homosexuality have been eliminated. Gay male characters in particular are only welcomed in mainstream mass media as long as they do not infer any sexual desires and practices.

In the past, gay men were consistently portrayed as effeminate in the media. In today's mass media, a man can be at the same time openly gay and masculine. However, media's gay masculinity is predominantly 'young, white, Caucasian, preferably with a well muscled, smooth body, handsome face, good education, professional job, and a high income' (Fejes, 2000: 115). This of course does not imply that all gay characters on television respond to this description or that the effeminate gay man has completely disappeared from the mass media. However, the focus of attention should shift to understanding if what is presented as the desirable image of the gay male, in terms of race and class in particular, is the same as the desirable image of the heterosexual male. Additionally, it is necessary to examine whether only a filtered version of the gay male, in terms of sexuality, practices and desires, is offered.

Method

The purpose of this article is to examine the narratives and images that dominate the construction of gay male identities on American television. To this end, the study entails a discourse analysis of three network and basic cable television shows with gay male leading characters from 2004: *Will & Grace* (NBC), *It's All Relative* (ABC) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo). Programs with gay male leading characters from premium cable channels are excluded in order to make the analysis consistent with the premise that network and basic cable have a broader reach and therefore a stronger influence. Other shows with supporting and recurring gay male characters are excluded in order to center the analysis on leading gay characters and prominently gay narratives. Finally, because the focus of this article is the constructions of gay male identities and challenges to normative notions of masculinity, important shows with lesbian characters, as well as images of bisexual and transgendered people, are not contemplated for the specific discourse analysis, but never ignored in the broader social and political context where these representations take place.

The study employs discourse analysis in order to identify the recurring themes, images and dominating discourses that guide the construction of gay male identities. Discourse analysis of mediated texts is useful to reveal the larger dynamics behind the production of such texts. Acosta-Alzuru and Lester-Roushanzamir define discourse as 'a system of representation in which shared meanings are produced and exchanged. Discourse emphasizes relations of power while also attending to relations of meanings and the process of production and exchange are therefore "materialized" within the text' (2000: 307). They favor textual analysis because it emphasizes not the meaning of the text but the social construction of meaning through the text. Miller advocates for the use of discourse analysis in issues of sexuality, gender and communication (1994: 215), and several scholars have approached the construction of mediated images of gay males in particular from the perspective of discourse analysis (Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Brookey, 1996; Fuoss, 1994; Meyer, 2003; Radel, 1994; Shugart, 2003). In this article, special attention is paid to the particular narratives, behaviors and situations that are used to identify gay male characters in opposition to other characters in the same text.

This study is informed by the author's consistent following of the programs that are the subject of analysis throughout their time on American television. However, for purposes of the present analysis, special focus is placed on the episodes of the 2003–4 season. The 2003–4 season is exceptional not only because of the sudden increase of gay characters (GLAAD, 2006) but also because it is the only season when these three programs coincided. It represents the first season for both *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *It's All Relative* and the sixth for *Will & Grace*, and it is the most abundant in analysis material. For the analysis, the author taped each episode of each program

throughout the season. Each taped episode was watched repeatedly in order to identify recurring themes and structures, and perform a more in-depth analysis.

The Programs

The 2003–4 television season constitutes the sixth year for *Will & Grace*, which remained one of the highest rated and most popular comedies for NBC until its cancellation in 2006. The comedy is built around Will and his best friend Grace, a single, heterosexual woman in Manhattan. Other leading characters include Will's gay friend Jack and Grace's assistant Karen. The NBC website describes the character of Will as a 'likable, handsome, and charming successful Manhattan lawyer' and the character of Jack as a 'self-involved young man with a complete matching set of emotional baggage' (NBC, 2004). The construction of the two gay male characters and their interaction with the other main characters are the focus of this analysis.

Probably motivated by *Will & Grace*'s success, ABC premiered for the 2003–4 season *It's All Relative*, a comedy built around a gay male couple, Philip and Simon, and their adopted daughter Liz who is engaged to Bobby, a boy whose parents, Mason and Audrey, represent the classic working-class American family. The comedy is built around the tension between the future in-laws: sophisticated gays versus uneducated conservatives. Due to mediocre ratings the show was cancelled after the first season.

In the summer of 2003, the basic cable network Bravo premiered *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a make-over show where a team of five gay men attempt to improve different aspects of straight men's lives. The show has had a very successful run, although the network announced that the fourth season, which ended in the summer of 2007, would be last one. The network website describes the show beyond the make-over genre as a 'make-better' show (Bravo, 2004) and describes the five men in the show as 'The Fab 5, an elite team of gay men who have dedicated their lives to extolling the simple virtues of style, taste and class.' The 'fab 5' include Kyan, Thom, Jai, Carson and Ted, providing expert advice on grooming, interior design, culture, fashion and food respectively. Bravo is a basic cable channel, part of the NBC media conglomerate, and a modified version of the show was broadcast a few times on NBC following *Will & Grace*.

Queer reading of mediated texts has been useful in deconstructing the hidden or subtle messages of perceived heterosexual narratives and even homophobic ones (Kanner, 2003). In the case of texts where homosexual content and intent are explicit, queer reading can be useful to uncover the underlying normative themes in the narrative. This article proposes that these programs are not equally open to any interpretation by audiences and adopts Hall's (1993) model of 'oppositional readings' versus 'preferred readings' as a valid alternative. Kanner notes how, according to many, and

the entertainment business in particular, '2003 was a very good year to be gay' on television (2004: 35). The preferred and dominant reading of these texts is that gays are being brought into the mainstream and that positive homosexual/heterosexual interactions are being reinforced. This article attempts to take the oppositional reading in its analysis and highlight the less optimistic trends. Unfortunately, the linearity of an article does not allow expressing how all the issues are interrelated and integrated. A few recurring themes are outlined below, but the reader should not take them in isolation from each other, as together they form what this article identifies as the social discourse of American prime-time television gay male identity.

'I'm kind of already here'

According to Jagose (1996), the term 'queer' is supposed to challenge traditional gender identities and sexual binaries. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Transsexual) activist groups such as Queer Nation first claimed the term in the 1970s as a strategy of provocation with clear political goals of destabilizing the status quo, and a radical brand of social and cultural scholarship called queer theory also adopted the term. However, in a process consistent with hegemonic theory, the term has been gradually incorporated into the mainstream while its destabilizing qualities have been neutralized. Thanks in part to the mass media, the term is now used to describe, almost endearingly, a particular category of queerness that is less socially threatening: that of the urban, sophisticated gay male (Kanner, 2004). In the radical and disruptive sense of the term, there is nothing queer about queer television when the flexibility of the term is reduced to an interpretation that reinforces the traditional homosexual/heterosexual binary.

Kanner (2003) notes that the gayness of *Will & Grace* is normalized because the driving force of the show is their heterosexual friendship. Will's sexuality is assumed and incorporated into the show mostly as comic source and rarely as driving narrative. In the end, the show is indeed about Will and Grace. In one episode, Will has finally started dating someone; Jack and Karen question Will on how he can be certain he likes his new boyfriend, Vince, given that Grace has not yet met him and approved of him. This becomes a source of anxiety for Will as he wonders if his interest on Vince will survive Grace's input. In the last scene, after Grace has met and approved Vince, the two men sit on either side of her on a sofa; when Will asks Grace if she could move so he could sit next to Vince, she replies 'I'm kind of already here.' It is clear for audiences that Grace will always be Will's most important relationship. In other words, she will remain between them, normalizing the homosexual relationship through her heterosexual influence.

The normalization of the term 'queer' is even more evident in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, given that the show presents a rather narrow range of gay

male identities. In the show, the words 'queer', 'gay' and 'queen' are used interchangeably to identify the same characters. Other queer possibilities are not only ignored but also often ridiculed. Consider this comment from Carson, the fashion guru, 'I'm bisexual, buy me something and I'll get very sexual.' In *Will & Grace*, a play that Will wrote about coming out is entitled 'Bye Bisexual', clearly implying that bisexuality is not an option, or perhaps an option reserved for closeted homosexuals. Besides the fact that flamboyant, effeminate, self-absorbed Jack is a very popular character, the truth is that the narrative presents him not so much as likeable as laughable. The real likeable, and desirable, character is masculine, successful, straight-acting, normalized-through-his-heterosexual-friendship Will.

In *It's All Relative*, Simon and Philip are also presented as a white, educated, financially successful, monogamous couple. Even when other queer possibilities are incorporated in the narrative, it is through normalized heterosexual ideals. Consider this conversation, when Mason, the bigoted working-class father of the groom, is helping Simon put together a crib they will give as a present to two lesbian friends who are soon to have a baby:

> *Mason*: Hold it! I'm building a crib for a couple of lesbos? What if it's a boy? Who's going to teach him to use his fist, to throw a ball, or pee standing up?
>
> *Simon*: Ellen.

The assignment of gender-appropriate characteristics of husband/wife roles to gay couples, in this case the stereotype of the butch lesbian, is a recurring motif in all the shows. In *It's All Relative*, Simon is composed and 'more mechanically inclined', while Simon is temperamental and interested in fashion and decoration. Even straight-acting Will is dating the archetype of masculinity, a police officer, and despite the fact that Will is a successful attorney, he still cleans and cooks for Vince, as exemplified in this interaction:

> *Vince*: Is this the olive *tapenade*? It's great! What's in it?
>
> *Will*:   I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.
>
> *Vince*: Could you not say that? Since I got shot like two hours ago?
>
> *Will*:   I had a day too!

These gender-traditional interactions among gay men could perhaps be explained by their humorous potential for the television sitcom genre. However, even more striking examples are found in *Queer Eye* given that the show, even if it purposely fails to do so, is supposed to represent reality by the very nature of its genre; these are not actors, these are real people. Kanner describes the *Queer Eye* team as 'gay superheroes' (2004: 36) who have the

power to improve heterosexual relationships. They can also be described as a group of five asexual fairy godmothers that appear, transform a straight man's love life, but are themselves denied love lives of their own. Not only is there not the smallest hint of sexual tension between five healthy, good-looking homosexual men, but viewers are also denied any information about the 'fab 5's' personal love lives. Indeed, they are portrayed, and often behave, as innocent children. Any sexual references among each other or with the straight man subject to the transformation are stereotypical, comical and therefore harmless. The willingness of the straight subject to accept, celebrate and then dismiss sexual innuendo from the fab 5 is itself evidence that the show celebrates heterosexuality. In one recent episode, they are helping Mark improve his relationship with his stepdaughter. Carson starts noting that 'when you don't have enough male influence in your life, terrible things can happen' and Jai, the culture guru, provides Mark with a lecture on father–daughter relations:

> Tonight is all about letting Karly know how much you want to be part of her life and her interests, the trust and reliability that daughters and fathers have, they build self-esteem and confidence; those are all things that a young adult needs, how important it is for a daughter to rely on her father.

It is particularly disturbing that a young, gay, Latino man can describe in such detail what he considers as the fundamental environment, something that the majority of children in America do not have, not to mention the children of alternative families.

'But in the end they're just guys'

Any overt endorsement of the heterosexual model includes, by default or necessity, a covert endorsement of a patriarchal system of male domination. After all, heteronormativity is about the maintenance of the status quo, with all its elements of gender, class and race in addition to sexuality. In a special anniversary episode, the cast and producers of *Queer Eye* revisit the pilot episode, attempting to evaluate the evolution of the show. One of the executive producers notes: 'The show never had an agenda other than people helping people, gay guys, straight guys, they do things a little different in the bedroom but in the end they're just guys.' He is only partially right. It is clear that the show, as well as the other shows analysed here, does not have a political agenda of social change (Kanner, 2004). But this does, even if unintentionally, serve to prevent social change, assisting straight men to maintain their status. It is in the end all about guys helping guys.

In the context of comedy, interactions that on the surface challenge or mock traditional masculine roles are common. However, the non-traditional is always normalized by the implicit assertion that traditional is still better, even if non-traditional can be tolerated. In an episode of *Will & Grace*, Jack is thrilled that

his teenaged son Elliot (the unexpected product of Jack's one visit to a sperm bank) is trying out for his school's cheerleading squad: 'You just made me the proudest father in the world.' Jack is extremely disappointed when Elliot does make it into the squad and wants to give up: 'Let me tell you something mister, my family has had four generations of male cheerleaders and you're not doing anything to break that up.' The references to male sport traditions are obvious, but then the narrative is reversed. Consider the following scene when Jack questions the cheerleader's captain about Elliot's rejection:

> *Jack*:   I'm Elliot's father. That boy can cheer! He comes from a long proud line of cheerleaders. His great grandfather came to this country with nothing but a pompom in his hand and a dream that someday he'll see his children stacked in a perfect pyramid. And now you're telling me you're going to deny my son his heritage?

> *Elliot*: I can't do this! I don't want to be a cheerleader. I never wanted to be one. The only reason I did this is so you'd pay attention to me. You know how humiliating it was for me to try out for cheerleading? But I was willing to do it to spend time with you.

> *Jack*:   I didn't know it meant that much to you Elliot.

> *Elliot*: Why do you think I call you every Friday night to come to my basketball games? You know, forget it, you can't understand.

Jack's comments about his family tradition of male cheerleading are preposterous; they do not represent any real alternative masculinity and are immediately dismissed. The narrative is normalized because we discover that Elliot's masculinity is *normal*, he does not like cheerleading, he likes to play basketball. In the end the gay man accommodates the straight man when Jack promises to attend Elliot's basketball games. It is interesting to note how the narrative of the scene not only ridicules gay men but also puts down feminine activities. In a hypothetical scene, if a teenage female character tried at basketball to please her lesbian mother, it would not be as comic, given that basketball is a traditional masculine activity and therefore respectable. In the scene that did happen what women do is considered more trivial, and a traditionally feminine activity like cheerleading is used to ridicule gay men.

A space for gay men to help straight men is provided on television even when the straight man is not present. In one episode of *Will & Grace*, Will gets involved in a domestic drama over his parents and his father's mistress. Will's interactions are only with his mother and his father's lover, but even though his father is not physically present, he is obviously the center of the argument. When Will complains to his mother about not calling any of her other sons for help, she replies: 'Your brothers can't help me, they're straight, they have no finesse for manipulating the details of petty dramas.' In other words, gay men have the ability and willingness to help in incon-

sequential affairs of straight men and their relationships. The situation is resolved in a surprisingly patriarchal way, with Will's father keeping both his wife and his mistress.

The narrative of all the shows greatly defines the masculinity of gay male characters as realized by the acceptance of straight men. In *It's All Relative*, the source of humor is the conflict between Simon and Philip with their future in-laws, in particular with Mason, described by ABC's website as 'an Archie Bunker of the new millennium' (2004). In this context, Simon and Philip are forced to go camping, meet a female stripper and visit a sports-bar, among other things, in their search for tolerance and acceptance. Gay men are compelled to celebrate and understand straight men's adventures, but not the other way around.

In *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the dynamic is portrayed as one of mutual dependence. The five gay guys are delighted to be accepted, and needed, by straight guys. For example, in one of the episodes they are overjoyed to find in the straight man's house a t-shirt with the message 'I don't like fags, I love them.' On the other hand, straight men welcome the gay men because they need them in order to improve themselves and their relationships. However, the dynamic is hardly equally dependent. In the end, it is only the heterosexual men's masculinities we see realized out of selfish interest, and the gay men appear content with the notion of 'Mission accomplished!' as their only reward. This unequal relationship is even more evident when one considers that gay men are placed in traditional female positions (hairdresser, decorator, etc.) that are often considered trivial. In the narrative of the show, the heterosexual man's masculinity is never threatened or affected by the proximity of gay men; rather, it is reinforced by servitude. As Carson, the fashion guru puts it: 'Highlighting your hair doesn't make you gay, highlighting someone else's hair, well that's a different story.' In the end they are all just guys, but it is clear that the hierarchy of gender that does not completely compensate for the hierarchy of sexual orientation.

'I have a PhD in upscale'

Chasin (2000) describes how capitalism has pervaded the American homosexual movement from the radical 1970s to our materialistic times. Brookey (1996) and Fejes (2000) note how high income is one of the elements that characterize media's version of the gay male. In the shows analysed for this article, all gay male characters are trendy, stylish and affluent, even when their sources of income are not revealed. As Kanner notes about the recent explosion of gay characters on television: 'The media have finally discovered how gayness can be capitalized upon and incorporated into popular culture without presenting a significant challenge or posing meaningful change' (2004: 36). A big part of the humorous conflict in *It's All Relative* is about

class. Liz's gay dads, Philip and Simon, are portrayed as wealthy cosmopolitans. Bobby's parents, Mason and Audrey, are an average working-class couple. These portrayals are not only consistent with long-held stereotypes of gay men, but also situate the straight couple at a more human level, probably easier for audiences to relate to. In one episode, when Audrey arrives at the store Philip selected for the wedding registration, she exclaims: 'It's incredible, it's like we're on *Wheel of Fortune*', while Philip concentrates on china patterns. The narrative uses class issues again and again to mark a distinction between gay and straight. When Philip and Simon are invited to go camping Philip asks if 'Armani makes hiking boots'. When his taste is challenged by a sales clerk he replies: 'I have a PhD in upscale.' The stereotype that gay men are wealthy and stylish is harmful, not only because it does not represent all gay men, but especially because it trivializes gay men's emotions and experiences. Consider the following scene, when Philip, while looking for the perfect gravy boat to add to Liz's wedding list, has a panic attack about the imminent loss of his daughter. Philip is counseled, in situ, by a celebrity therapist and later Simon arrives:

Simon: When we heard a man was freaking out in the china department, we just knew.

Therapist: This is obviously not about the gravy boat.

Simon: You know, it's probably a little bit about the gravy boat.

Liz: Dad you're not losing me, we're just adding. Think of it as accessorizing!

The insistence that Philip's nervous state is at least in part about the gravy boat, and the fact that Liz can only communicate with her father through references to fashion, trivialize and undermine any genuine concerns that a father can have about his daughter's wedding.

Class is explicitly a part of gay identity in *Will & Grace* as well. Will, Jack and Karen are well-groomed inhabitants of Manhattan and make fun of Grace when she moves with her husband to Brooklyn, referring to it as 'another country'. The lives of most Americans must indeed seem like a different country when compared to the lives of television gays and their friends. In one scene Jack is teaching Karen to dance the fox trot and mentions: 'Before language people communicated through dancing, language was only invented when unattractive people were born and needed to be commented on.' More often than not, the narratives portray gay men as frivolous, which, as much as it is funny, can be isolating.

However, consumerism is not as evident on any show as it is on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Product placements and sponsorships of all kinds are explicit in every instance of the 'make-better' process, which is achieved through a remarkable ability to take advantage of the market's choices. The

team of gay men is portrayed as the holder of all secrets of the 'best deals,' the 'essentials' and the 'latest', but Carson, the fashion guru, is the essence of it all with his comments and sarcasm. His remarks about sending ugly clothes to 'Tragickastan, Indonesia and Oklahoma, the state not the musical' show a rather unsettling disregard for world affairs. All gay characters on television exist *because* of capitalism; it is the force that makes them possible and the only agenda allowed. *Queer Eye* exists through consumerism and the queer guys, self-reportedly, exist through the show. When Carson speaks about the show's producers he claims 'without them we were nothing, we were just retail sales associates'.

The use of class to construct different levels of masculinity is problematic in a larger context. Describing gay men as privileged not only misrepresents the diversity of gay men but also constructs a notion that everything that is urban, upper-class or educated is, by default, more feminine than masculine. In the mediated world, 'real' masculinities are often working-class, rural and anti-intellectual. Even straight male characters that do not adhere to some of these characteristics are not 'real' men. Therefore, the straight men that the queer guys help are always the most inept at cooking, grooming, decorating, entertaining, etc. They are almost a caricature of masculinity. Along with the humor that this interaction obviously provides, some audience members must be reassured by the stark difference between the straight guy and the queer guys.

'You are a WASP'

Towards the end of the season, Bravo aired the pilot episode that the producers used to pitch the program to the network, but which had not previously aired for the public. It provides interesting material to understand how the show was conceived. Only two members of the original cast remain, Carson in fashion and Ted in food, the other three were replaced before the show's official premiere. James, a young African-American man, was originally in charge of the field of culture. In the pilot episode the gay men are 'making better' a white advertising executive from Boston. While reviewing his CD collection, James comments, 'One thing is really clear about your taste, you're a WASP', and he adds, 'You know, there is hip-hop now.' What is meant to be a joke about the straight man's taste in music reveals a more meaningful subject. Indeed, everything in the show, except for James, is very WASP, at least in appearance. Of course we can only speculate on why James was eventually replaced, but the fact that his replacement, Jai Rodriguez, is a young Latino says something about the token minority required for political correctness.

In *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* the role of the culture expert is broadly defined in terms of music, dance, sports and other related activities. Kanner (2004) compares the increased visibility of gays in the media with that achieved

by African-Americans, and wonders if in the future the homosexual fight for
visibility will result in their also being reduced to an entertainment class. In the
show the concept of minorities as entertainers is very explicit; Jai, the Latino,
is in charge of 'culture', while all the other aspects of self-improvement, if not
less frivolous at least more glamorous, are the domain of white gay men.

   All the gay male characters in the other shows analysed are Caucasian.
Any references to racial or ethnic minorities are marginal and stereotypical.
In one episode of *Will & Grace*, when Will asks Jack about his inspiration
for attending nursing school, he replies: 'That would probably have to be
Dianne Carroll on *Julia*, she inspired me to be a beautiful, elegant black
woman … and a nurse.' What could be a compliment on the positive influ-
ence of an African-American television character is reversed in the context
of Jack's known disregard for anything that matters. It is also another exam-
ple of using a traditional female profession to ridicule gay men. In the same
episode, Will asks Jack how he managed to finish nursing school in just a
few months, and he replies:

> I had 16 credits from my vacation in Mexico. It clouded over for the first few days
> so I decided to take a few courses from the local medical school. I don't know
> what they were 'cause I don't speak Spanish, but they were handing those credits
> out like candy!

Race- and ethic-based humor traditional in American sitcoms is recurrent in
a show that, by its very nature, is supposed to be non-traditional.

Discussion

Increased visibility and media representation have long been a concern of the
American GLBT movement. Some claimed that after 2003 media visibility
was no longer an issue. *Will & Grace* and *It's All Relative* are no longer on
air and Bravo announced the cancellation of *Queer Eye* for the summer of
2007. According to GLAAD (2006), even if the total number of queer char-
acters on television continues to increase, the number of leading characters
has dropped to two in the current season. Furthermore, the overwhelming
majority of queer characters on television remain gay white males. Simple
observation suggests that white men also overpopulate the programming of
LOGO, the first American gay cable network launched in 2005. Evidence
from this article suggests that visibility is no longer an issue only for white,
affluent, gay males who hold traditional family values. The absence of other
queer possibilities in mediated texts is in itself material for further analysis.
Jagose (1996) describes how the term 'queer' is supposed to resist catego-
rizations. At least partly because of the media, the term 'queer' is now used
to identify almost exclusively gay white males.

Connell (1992) defines gay masculinity as subordinate to hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Demetriou (2001) describes a hegemonic bloc that incorporates all masculinities into patriarchal domination. This notion holds for mediated representations only as long as race, class and queerness are not part of the equation. Gay men assisting straight men enhances their apparent domination over the latter; however, it is only narrowly defined gay masculinity that is allowed to take this position. This privilege for a particular kind of gay male is achieved not only through the exclusion of other gay males, but also through the exclusion of ethnic, racial, gender and class concerns (Ward, 2000). This conservative and exclusionist take on the queer experience is particularly problematic given the current cultural climate in America. In 2004, 13 states approved legislation to ban same-sex marriage in addition to five states that already have similar laws (Rosenberg, 2006). Under such conditions, one can expect that the range of queer media representation will be restricted even further in order to present a more palatable image to the American public.

The main question addressed in this article is whether the explosion of gay male characters and the perceived advancement in their representation challenge heteronormative notions of masculinity and hegemonic models of social relations. Using the notions of queer theory, a discourse analysis of *Will & Grace*, *It's All Relative* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* demonstrates that their discourse of gay identity is not disruptive of the heterosexual social order. This study suggests the need for a more holistic approach to queer studies. The analysis provides evidence of the intersection of gender, race and class in how mediated gay masculinities are articulated. The gay male identities analysed not only reinforce patriarchal notions of masculinity but also traditional constructions of femininity. Further examination of the relationship between constructions of gay masculinity and constructions of femininity are required, and may provide a common ground of research for queer and feminist scholars. The analysis provides examples of the intersection of race, class and gay identity that are also relevant. Additional attention is required to the way that mediated constructions not only trivialize gay masculinities but also heterosexual masculinities that fail to represent the values associated with 'real' men. A more sophisticated theoretical framework that can broaden the scope of queer theory and improve research is required. Queer analysis of mediated texts from a social perspective should not be seen as a destination, but rather as an intersection of issues of gender, race, class and sexuality that are part of our everyday lives.

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