

First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage: (Homo)Normalizing Romance on American Television

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Abstract: In recent history LGBT characters on television were depicted as chaste and alone or were relegated to series on premium cable channels that depicted them as wanton sex fiends. Today, however, gay romance has become increasingly popular in mainstream programming. This paper examines what makes contemporary series with gay romance like *Modern Family* and *Glee* different from LGBT-themed programs in recent history. Specifically, I argue that the success of gay romance on television today is a result of homonormativity, a political position favoring conformity to certain normative social values. Because of romance's emphasis on betrothal and happy endings, same-sex romance necessarily becomes homonormative; gay couples on television look and sound like their straight counterparts. By favoring marriage and parenthood as ultimate life goals, and by depicting white, middle- and upper-class men, gay romance has succeeded in winning over audiences. However, this mainstream appeal comes at the expense of relative invisibility for other queer identities and lifestyles.

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Bryan and David sitting in a tree

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

First comes love, then comes inability to marry

Then comes a stranger and an invasive medical procedure

Then comes the baby in the baby carriage

This modified version of the children's nursery rhyme, featured in the first episode of *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-2013), epitomizes contemporary television's depictions of gay romance: different, but the same.[1] During its short run, *The New Normal* was hailed as wildly subversive and predictably normative, but its declaration that two men could find happiness by marrying (albeit not legally) and having a baby (by a surrogate) is one that echoes the dominant themes for both contemporary LGBT[2] causes and traditional romance. Prior to its broadcast, *The New Normal* gained notoriety when the Mormon-owned Utah NBC affiliate announced it would not air the show, citing its insidious content (Skoloff). In response, NBC released the pilot online before the broadcast premiere, and the response among viewers was surprise and relief at how protagonists Bryan and David were just like regular people: "When Bryan and David show physical affection [...] they look and feel natural together, like a couple should" (Buis). Through its title as much as its plot of love-marriage-baby carriage, which I will call the normative trajectory, the series both valorized traditional romantic conventions and subverted them by allowing them to be enacted through a gay couple.

Across forms of popular entertainment, narratives like Bryan and David's are becoming more prevalent. According to the annual survey conducted by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), LGBT characters and storylines peaked in the 2012-2013 U.S. television season (Gouttebroze). The reality of this proliferation must be reconciled with the traditional economic model for television, which relies on advertising revenue and reaching the broadest possible audience for success. For this reason, television tends to "reflect, refract, and produce dominant ideologies" (Joyrich 133), and its messages "either directly or in the guise of entertainment serve to create, confirm, and cultivate" social values (Raley and Lucas 21). The presence of LGBT stories, including gay romance, must therefore say something about American culture.

At first glance, romance and television would seem to be at odds because of the former's dependence on narrative closure (happily ever after) and the latter's need to sustain conflicts in order to continue broadcasting. Gay romance would especially seem out of place on mainstream television given its reliance upon mass appeal, yet gay romance flourished on television during the 2012-2013 season. As I demonstrate in this article, this was at the expense of true queerness. In this article, I examine three series that foregrounded gay romance: *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015), *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-2013), and *Husbands* (CW Seed, 2011-). By charting how the traditional romance plot leads to the normative trajectory for the couples in these series, I argue that there can be no queer romance on television.

Homonormativity and the Romance Plot

The normative trajectory of love-marriage-baby carriage followed by gay couples on *Glee*, *The New Normal*, and *Husbands* fits the pattern of heterosexual romance. Although scholars debate which qualities are necessary for a work to be called a "romance," most agree that romance emphasizes characters living "happily ever after" (HEA) or "happy for now" (HFN). Catherine Roach, for instance, argues that across various subgenres, the "core genre message" of romance is always to "find your One True Love – your one-and-only –

and live happily ever after” (¶1). This happiness is often, though not always, achieved through betrothal of some sort. Pamela Regis defines a romance novel as a work that “tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19). Roach’s definition of the core genre message privileges monogamy, and Regis, studying popular romance novels, excludes men from the position of the one being courted. Even if we expand Regis’ ideas to include male heroes, these common conceptions of what formulates romance culminate in normativity: engagement, marriage, or some form of monogamous commitment leads to happiness.

In the early 1990s, after a significant number of gay men had lost their lives to AIDS, a “new strain of gay moralism” advocated monogamy and marriage as safer alternatives to the promiscuity traditionally associated with the “gay lifestyle” (Duggan 53). Rather than confrontational politics in opposition to hegemonic heterosexuality, assimilationists encouraged the upholding and sustaining of heteronormative values, but this came at the cost of a “demobilized gay constituency, and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Concomitant with the rise of neoliberalism in the United States, the juggernaut of LGBT advocacy organizations, the Human Rights Campaign, was formed, and “[i]mages of angry protesters shouting, ‘We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it’ were replaced by photos of suit-clad gay leaders...hobnobbing with the likes of Ted Kennedy” (Becker 43).[3] Because neoliberalism extends beyond the free market to “every sector of culture” (Ferguson and Hong 1057) and is “deeply implicated in shaping, taming, and domesticating sexualities and genders” (Elia and Yep 879), homonormativity was a logical end result: greater visibility of gay and lesbian couples whose lives look like those of their straight counterparts.

Organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and the National Center for Lesbian Rights have historically championed a number of causes, but none so fervently as same-sex marriage. Polls in August 2010 indicated that acceptance for same-sex marriage had reached a majority of Americans (Gelman et al), and this was shortly followed by several crucial legal and judicial milestones. First, the Obama administration announced it would no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage on a national level as between one man and one woman. In particular, during the 2012-2013 television season, same-sex marriage was a topic impossible to avoid on television, as candidates for election to all levels of the American government espoused their views and as same-sex marriage appeared in various fictional and nonfiction television shows featuring gay couples. Most significantly, the United States Supreme Court heard arguments in two cases regarding the legality of same-sex marriage, *United States v. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*. As that television season ended, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that paved the way for certain national benefits to same-sex couples (and culminated in national legal same-sex marriage as of June 26, 2015). Thus, while same-sex marriage had been foregrounded among LGBT rights causes for nearly twenty years, it reached a particular apotheosis in 2012-2013.

Alongside the development of homonormativity as a preferred political position in the LGBT rights movement, queer theory became increasingly popular in academia. The term “queer” in popular usage often serves as a catch-all for LGBT as well as other identities and sexualities, but its academic and political meaning is usually in counterpoint to the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and gay/straight, and in counterpoint to homonormativity. Michael Warner, for instance, argues that “normal” marriage, even

among same-sex couples, stigmatizes other lifestyles and identities, like those who wish to engage in open relationships, polyamorous groups, and asexual people (81-148). In response to homonormativity's privileging of parenthood, Lee Edelman argues that adults are constantly subordinating their desires for children, and that this subordination is laden with homophobia (for instance, the claim that laws against gays and lesbians "protect our children"). For Edelman, same-sex marriage and parenthood thus participate in an internalized homophobia; queerness is therefore a desire against propagation and futurity (33-66). These two examples demonstrate the extent to which queer theory is "committed to challenging and troubling ideological norms" (Joyrich 133). In other words, it is easier to understand what "queer" is not or is anti-, rather than what "queer" is. As Eve Sedgwick explains, "queer" can refer to the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8, emphasis original). Later, Sedgwick concedes that "queer" also refers more simply to same-sex sexual desire, before she determines that "queer" is best used to signify identities, including race and ethnicity, intersecting with sexual desire and gender performance (8-9). While these example definitions and applications of "queer" vary, they all remark upon what queerness stands in opposition to: hegemonic identities, including whiteness, maleness, and normativity. If the most important aspect of the romance plot is its culmination in marriage, and the most important aspect of queerness is its opposition to the normative trajectory, queerness and romance are irreconcilable concepts.

Queer Television: Broadcast's Gay Eunuchs and Cable's Sex Gods

"Queer television studies" has its own set of varied meanings, given television's (and television studies') emphasis on the mainstream and queer theory's position as anti-normative, or the "tension between the articulation of the mainstream and the unsettling of the mainstream" (Joyrich 133). Television's articulation of the everyday in both content and its constant presence in the home is the normativity that queerness stands in opposition to (Aaron 69). Television's broadcast schedule, for example, reinforces normative values of family and home. Although many of us now stream series online or record them with a digital video recorder (DVR), television networks still presuppose heteronormativity through the "temporal coordination of the nuclear family" by broadcasting around the "life timetables of children and child rearing activities....and eventually [having] the family united every evening in front of the box during prime time's evening hours" (Needham 145). Television's reliance upon the succession of episodes to create a season and seasons to create a series and its tendency toward copycat series and spinoffs to capitalize on the popular are examples of television's own investment in reproduction (Joyrich 136). Content within particular series, however, may challenge hegemonic normativity by allowing for a subtextual reading of certain characters as queer (Doty 2). By the 2012-2013 season, plenty of characters on broadcast television were openly gay or lesbian, though few would identify as queer, and a reading of the television series and storylines featuring these characters reiterates the normative.

In one night of television watching during the 2012-2013 season, the average American could watch national or local news coverage of pending LGBT rights legislation, an episode of *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-) with gay parents Mitch and Cameron, an episode of any series on HGTV in which a gay couple achieved their HEA through the purchase of a new home, and an episode of *Glee* in which young, newly out teenagers celebrated their diversity. Across broadcast and cable, fictional and nonfictional television, gay couples fell in love and set up house like any other romantic couple.

Gay and lesbian characters have arguably always existed in popular culture, but the recognition of them was only possible through an understanding of gay semiotics. Part of the difficulty in ascertaining and asserting sexual identity is that it is not a visible identity but one shaped through emotions and behaviors. As Sedgwick explains, race, gender, age, size, and physical abilities are identities that are “visible in all but exceptional cases,” while sexual identity requires one to publicly assert his or her marginality (*Epistemology* 75). Absent a public declaration, others may read into clues in speech, behavior, and attitudes; for instance, Sedgwick describes how readers might decode particular adjectives and phrases in nineteenth century literature to understand a character’s homosexuality (94-97). Many of the semiotics that identified particular characters as gay men and lesbians to audiences were portrayals as “funny clowns, flaming queens, fairies, fags and flits” (Raley and Lucas 24). Looking through television history, we may read a particular character as gay based on the flamboyancy of his fashion, mannerisms, and interactions with the opposite sex. Felix Unger of *The Odd Couple* (ABC, 1970-1975) exhibits many of the characteristics traditionally associated with gay men: he is tidy, dresses well, likes to cook and clean, and is far more invested in his relationship with his roommate Oscar than any romantic relationship with a woman. While *The Odd Couple* flirted with the “bromance” between Felix and Oscar, the series never explicitly declared Felix’s homosexuality; it is only by decoding particular cultural signs with the series that one can assume Felix might be gay. Queer readings of characters have historically been possible, but these characters were not allowed to participate in the traditional romance plot or normative trajectory.

In recent decades, gay and lesbian characters in film and television have openly identified as such but were typically relegated to the role of humorous sidekick or sexless character on a failed quest for love. The rise of gay characters on television in the 1990s reflected broadcast networks’ attempt to compete with the growing cable market for hip, young, affluent viewers (Becker 80-107). The titular character of the sitcom *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006) was a gay man whose unending quest to find the love of his life left him in an ersatz marriage with his heterosexual female roommate and best friend Grace. During the few times that Will Truman was romantically involved with men, sexual activity – even kissing – was rarely depicted, in contrast to the more explicit depictions of Grace’s heterosexual couplings. The success of *Will and Grace* may be attributed to many factors, including stellar writing and acting and a competitive time slot, but one important reason for the show’s success was due to the lack of gay romance it depicted. By relegating Will to the role of funny gay eunuch, he became non-threatening and easier to have in one’s living room once a week.

Concurrently, the premium cable channel Showtime aired *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), a one-hour drama about a circle of gay and lesbian friends loosely modelled on a UK series of the same name. Because premium cable channels like Showtime work on a subscription model and do not rely upon cautious advertisers to fund their programming,

the series they offer tend to titillate and push cultural boundaries more than series on broadcast television or basic cable. *Queer as Folk* challenged the “gay eunuch” trope through its constant depictions of sex between men. In 2004, the network debuted *The L Word*, a similar series featuring a group of lesbian friends. With fewer restrictions on sexual content in its programming than broadcast networks, Showtime counted on gay and lesbian subscribers to tune into these two series for graphic depictions of sex.

In spite of all the sex, the normative trajectory is something most of the characters in these two series strive for. Both series featured storylines about going to Canada to get legally married, and at least one couple on each series has a child. Infidelity and promiscuity were plotlines used to sustain drama and conflict, but the treatment of infidelity in these story arcs was unsympathetic. Brian of *Queer as Folk* and Shane of *The L Word* are the lone figures in their social circles who favor anonymous sexual encounters and disavow marriage and monogamy, yet their character arcs assert the value of normativity. When Shane leaves her fiancée Carmen at the altar, her life spins out of control. Shane drinks, takes drugs, gets into a car accident, and only cleans up when her little brother is thrust into her care, thus forcing Shane to follow the normative trajectory she had arduously avoided. Although at first skeptical of her role as caregiver, Shane soon thrives as big sister/guardian, and, in the seasons that follow, has much less indiscriminate sex and more success with long-term relationships.

Queer as Folk's Brian is “someone who has completely liberated himself from the repressive conventions of heterosexuality,” the “ultimate gay hero” (Robinson 154), but he is also narcissistic, relentlessly chastised by his friends and family for not “growing up” and “settling down.” Brian undertakes a five-season, on-again, off-again romance with Justin, a man more than ten years his junior, and during most of their relationship, the two agree that they are free to engage in extrarelational sex. Rodger Streitmatter argues that this is one of the “most intriguing sexual plotlines” of the series: “how two men who aren't monogamous can, nevertheless, have an emotionally committed relationship” (129). By the series' final season, Justin has grown tired of their clubbing, drug-using, sexually indiscriminate lives, and in order not to lose him completely, Brian reluctantly proposes marriage. Like Shane and Carmen, Brian and Justin do not make it to the altar; they recognize that marriage will limit their freedom and mutually call off the wedding. In the final moment of the series, Brian dances alone at their favorite nightclub after Justin has moved away. This conclusion to their romance is the antithesis to Regis' notion that romance culminates in marriage or betrothal, and may be read as queering of the traditional romance plot: the ultimate act of love is not marrying your beloved, but letting him go.

This reading of the conclusion to Brian and Justin's story, however, is at odds with the series' repeated emphasis on “settling down” and the increasing number of challenges to Brian's queer perspective (Demory 75). Brian's body suffers the consequences of his active sex life. He develops testicular cancer, which is not a direct result of sex but which threatens his performance and his physique. Later, he catches syphilis as a direct result of an unprotected oral sex act. As Brian and his friends grow older, their lives move on while Brian clings to the life of clubbing, recreational drug use, and casual sex. His solitude as he dances in the final moment of the series may be true to his independent spirit, but it is also coded as sad and possibly pathetic.[4]

Rather than offering a genuine alternative to homonormativity, Shane and Brian serve as cautionary tales that reiterate the value of marriage, monogamy, and parenthood. Although the other characters in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* may not always succeed at maintaining their relationships or staying faithful to their partners, the normative trajectory is lauded by them, and, by extension, the series as a whole. Although Showtime's status as a premium cable channel enabled more vivid depictions of gay and lesbian sex, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* persisted in privileging the sequence of love, marriage, and baby carriage.

Popping the Question on Primetime

These earlier examples of gay eunuchs and gay sex gods striving to follow the normative trajectory on broadcast and cable respectively are echoed in the 2012-2013 primetime broadcast series that foregrounded gay romance. The 2012-2013 season was especially significant in the development of LGBT representations on television not only because of the swell in representations charted by GLAAD, but because for the first time the number of LGBT characters on screen was roughly equivalent to the number of Americans who identified as LGBT, around four percent (Gouttebroze; Gates and Newport). Additionally, the storylines for characters on *Glee*, *The New Normal*, and the web series *Husbands* mirrored stories on the evening news of gay couples marrying and becoming parents, elements typically present in fictional romance. In particular, the marriage proposal serves as the key trope that marks the narrative of these series as romance.

As the central gay couple on *Glee*, Kurt and Blaine have also flirted with proposals of their own. A deleted scene from the 2011-2012 season features Blaine giving Kurt a promise ring and pledging his love. As soon as Kurt sees the jewelry box, he interrupts Blaine's speech to declare: "If that's an engagement ring, my answer is yes!" This scene, dubbed "box scene" by fans, was uploaded to YouTube later in 2012 after fans read the episode script, realized the scene had been cut, and pestered Fox and series creator and executive producer Ryan Murphy to see it. It reached its peak in fan discussions and YouTube hits at the beginning of the 2012-2013 season, which would see plenty of stories about the tortuous evolution of Kurt and Blaine's relationship.

In the fourth season of *Glee*, broadcast in 2012-2013, Kurt moves to New York to pursue his dreams, a move encouraged by Blaine. Once Kurt is gone, however, the two break up and date others. When they are finally reconciled, Blaine becomes determined to propose to Kurt and is aided by two older lesbians who discuss with him the increasing acceptance for same-sex couples – or, to use Regis' terms, the barrier between the couple and its subsequent fall in order to achieve romantic narrative closure in betrothal. In the first episode of the fifth season, which was written and shot only a few weeks after the Supreme Court's decisions in *United States v. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, Blaine formally proposes to Kurt.[5] In the series finale, set five years in the future, Kurt and Blaine are married, and – like Bryan and David of *The New Normal* – are expecting a child via surrogate mother.

As evidenced by its title, *The New Normal* lauds the normative trajectory. Bryan and David are introduced as quasi-married: they have been in a committed relationship for

years, and they own a home and dog together. In the pilot, they decide the next step is having a baby via a surrogate. As if Bryan and David were not normative enough, they quickly become engaged. Bryan, who watches the bridal gown shopping television series *Say Yes to the Dress* (TLC, 2007-), dreams of having an elaborate wedding, but David believes the ceremony is meaningless if it is not attached to the same legal rights as heterosexual marriage. Nevertheless, he gives in and proposes. The proposal takes place at an OB/GYN office, with their surrogate Goldie in the examination chair and a sonogram of their unborn baby in the background. David kneels before Bryan and puts a candy Ring Pop on Bryan's finger. Bryan says the magic "yes," then David rises, they kiss, and the camera quickly pans to the sonogram. While traditional heterosexual proposals do not involve a surrogate or a sonogram, these additional elements only serve to reinforce the extent to which Bryan and David embody homonormativity as they embark upon parenthood. That the proposal occurred after the couple decided to have a baby together but prior to the baby's arrival serves an implicit reinforcement of the notion that having a baby out of wedlock is immoral. This notion is visually manifested in the camera panning away from the potentially controversial image of two men kissing and toward the sonogram, as if to ask the audience if it really wants the baby to grow up in a household with unmarried parents.[6] Bryan echoes the sentiment that having children out of wedlock is immoral in a later episode. While this is an argument for same-sex marriage, it is also a conservative one.

Both *Glee* and *The New Normal* were the brainchild of creator and director Ryan Murphy, an openly gay Hollywood executive, and as such, their particular view into gay romance could be chalked up to Murphy's own worldview. The characters Bryan and Kurt are both loose fictional versions of Murphy; Bryan, for instance, is a television producer who works on a musical series called *Sing*, clearly a fictional version of *Glee*. However, the emphasis on the normative trajectory in gay romance is not unique to these series and is reflective of larger social and cultural values. The tremendously popular *Modern Family* also depicts a gay couple who are parents in what Steven Edward Doran calls a "homodomestic" relationship (95-104). Perhaps most revealingly, the web series *Husbands*, which was first released online for free viewing, depicted a homonormative (homodomestic) couple. Its status as independent media meant it did not rely upon advertising revenue and mass appeal in order to succeed, and could, in theory, depict genuine queerness.

Like *The New Normal*, the web series *Husbands* begins with its couple, Brady and Cheeks, already betrothed. The premise of the series is that Brady and Cheeks, after only a few weeks of dating, got married in Las Vegas while drunkenly celebrating (fictional at the time) nationwide marriage equality. Because they are a famous professional baseball player and reality TV star, Brady and Cheeks are pressured by LGBT advocacy organizations to set a good example for same-sex marriage. From this beginning, the series follows the couple learning to cohabitate and serve as role models for the marriage equality cause, and, finally, having an elegant wedding to make up for the one they were too drunk to remember.

Part of the charm and noteworthiness of *Husbands* is its awareness of its place in the history of sitcoms and LGBT media.[7] Its narrative reinterprets newlywed sitcoms for a gay couple. Plots involve the flamboyant and comedic Cheeks causing scandals while straight-acting Brady is left to wag his finger, as Ricky Ricardo might have on *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957). In the second season, which was released in the fall of 2012, Cheeks

tweets a photo of himself and Brady kissing, and within minutes conservative religious organizations protest what they perceive as the couple's flaunting of sex and sexuality. While Brady and Cheeks debate whether they have indeed done anything controversial, television screens throughout their home display some of the images of heterosexual sex that inundate television with little complaint from conservative groups. Brady and Cheeks grant an interview that explains how "normal" their lives are, and during the interview they revisit their courtship, thus allowing the audience to enjoy a romance in reverse.

This media-frenzy storyline calls attention to the pushback series like *Glee* and *The New Normal* have received for their portrayals of gay sexual intimacy, even when they are tame in comparison to scenes of heterosexual couplings – pushback that results in *Modern Family*'s Mitch and Cameron rarely showing physical affection. *Husbands* depicts Brady and Cheeks as a couple with a healthy sexual appetite; however, their sexuality is always expressed within the confines of marriage, and only kissing and lying in bed together are seen on screen. The final episode of the series shows Brady and Cheeks remarrying to reiterate that their sexuality is restricted to marriage. Although this episode was not intended to be the conclusion of the series, no additional episodes have been produced, and the wedding-as-finale neatly concludes the romance narrative.

In her study of proposals in heterosexual romance novels, Laura Vivanco finds that engagement rings typically get more attention than wedding bands, a phenomenon she attributes in part to the more elaborate design of engagement rings. The private nature of the proposal, as opposed to the public ring exchange at a wedding, makes the engagement ring more meaningful (100). Though the Ring Pop in *The New Normal* references a joke from earlier in the episode, its uniqueness as an engagement ring for Bryan fits this pattern. Likewise, the promise ring Blaine gives Kurt is made from the wrappers of his favorite brand of gum, folded into a bow tie to reflect his love of fashion. Just as the cut, size, and setting of the engagement ring diamond should be reflective of a woman's unique personality, these unusual rings demand attention – perfect for the flamboyant Bryan and Kurt. The offering of each ring emulates heterosexual proposal scenes: man on bended knee, ring offered to the woman (here, the more effeminate partner), and a kiss to seal the deal.

“Gaycism” and Exclusion

Series like *Glee* and *The New Normal* present gay couples to a wide audience, but do so by making the couples as normative and nonthreatening as possible. Gay couples on these series look and behave like many of their straight counterparts on other television series. Bryan and David, Kurt and Blaine, Mitch and Cameron, and Brady and Cheeks are all white and middle- to upper-class. One partner is more masculine and one more effeminate, so that the pair further mirrors the traditional gender roles within a heterosexual couple. The couples' desire to remain monogamous, marry (legally or symbolically), and have children reinforces their normativity. Through their romantic storylines, these gay characters seem like “regular people” and act “like a couple should.”

These depictions of homonormativity, while opening romance up to gay couples, do not represent the full range of experiences within the LGBT community. Despite increasing

numbers of LGBT characters, television scholar Kelly Kessler complains that “much of television remains relatively static and predictable” (140). This predictability is indicative of the same-but-different quality found in all romance. The success of romance, according to An Goris, lies in its ability to grant “both comfort and surprise,” to appear “both familiar and new” (76). Likewise, broadcast television relies upon familiar tropes and conventions enacted through new characters. Stories of gay romance embody the same-but-different, familiar-but-new quality so necessary for success in both romance and television.

The corollary to that familiar, satisfying feeling is that there is a lack of romance for those who identify as queer, trans, or bisexual on television. Even lesbians are “more deeply coded by invisibility” than gay men (Walters 161). This can partly be attributed today to economics; gay men tend to have more disposable income than lesbians and so make a more attractive target audience for which television series are crafted (Streitmatter 147).[8] While white lesbians have not been as visible on television as white gay men, they have certainly been seen more frequently than racial minorities of any non-heterosexual identity and more than those who identify as queer or trans. A lesbian in a committed relationship is more easily likened to a white heterosexual than a queer person of color. Although recent series on alternative platforms, notably *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-) and *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-), feature trans characters, the stories about these characters are about acceptance for their identities and the transition process, not love and romance. While “social tolerance and legal equality have improved the lives of many...the privilege of white, middle-class lesbians and gay men appears to have become entrenched” (Brown 1065). Homonormative white gay men can achieve more power and visibility while other racial and sexual identities have been pushed farther into the margins of popular culture.

Since “neoliberalism does not appreciate fluidity, hybridity, or any other shades of grey” (Kimmel and Llewellyn 1087), then it follows that television today would have little appreciation for anything other than homonormativity. Additionally, by featuring gay characters on their series, some television executives may consider inclusivity a *fait accompli*. The vernacular term “gaycist” has been used by television critics in reference to series like *Glee* and *The New Normal*, not because of their unfair treatment of gay characters (as the rhyming term “racist” suggests) but because investment in gay characters enables television producers “carte blanche to cut PC corners elsewhere” (Bans). For instance, Bryan and David of *The New Normal* seek their HEA through the use of a lower-class woman’s body, yet the series does little to examine the economic inequalities that lead Goldie to agree to serve as their surrogate. In a flashback to his single life, Bryan is horrified to learn he is on a date with an intersex person; his love for David is “normal” by comparison. Read through a politically queer lens, gay romance “appropriates an ongoing U.S. narrative around the pursuit of equality, freedom, and liberation as cover for the same old American traditions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and general social inequality” (Henry). In a “gaycist” (or homonormative) television landscape, depictions of queerness are more obscure, neatly disregarded by gay men in order to better align themselves with the hegemony. In other words, those intersectional and multivalent identities so important to Sedgwick’s understanding of queerness are largely absent on television featuring gay romance.

Gay romance narratives are “both resistant and recuperative,” sites for working out “contesting ideologies circulating” throughout our culture (Therrien 165). The progress

made by opening romance up to gay couples on the one hand coincides with the subsuming of alternative sexualities and identities into the normative trajectory on the other. The prevalence of homonormativity on television is a double-edged sword. Gay romance depicts stable, loving relationships, but its emphasis on HEA and betrothal reinforces the idea that the ultimate life goals are monogamous marriage and procreation. Gay romance on television may be new and reflect social progress, but as the examples I have used here demonstrate, gay romance is often not queer.

[1] I am grateful for the feedback previous versions of this essay received from Tasha Oren, Stuart Moulthrop, Gilberto Blasini, and the anonymous peer reviewers. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at conferences for the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and the Fan Studies Network.

[2] I use the acronym LGBT (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) deliberately. My elimination of additional letters, such as I (intersex), Q (queer or questioning), or A (asexual) is not intended to neglect those groups, but rather to demonstrate how certain facets of culture and politics exclude them. Likewise, I use the terms “gay” and “lesbian” only to reference homosexual men and women respectively, not as catch-all terms for the larger LGBT+ community.

[3] The Human Rights Campaign was recently exposed for its own neoliberal practices: namely, that women and people of color have been systematically excluded from raises and promotions. See Brydum, Sunnivie, “Pride at Work Tells HRC: ‘Enough Is Enough,’” *The Advocate*, 30 Aug. 2015. Web.

[4] The club at which Brian is dancing and which he owns has been bombed by anti-gay activists. The scene begins with Brian dancing among the wreckage and cuts to a vision of the club restored and full of men. It is possible to read this as a moment in the future, after the club has been renovated and reopened, or as a fantasy that Brian clings to as his friends and even his business have moved on.

[5] Production on the fifth season was delayed due to the death of actor Cory Monteith, but this had little effect on the gay romance storyline between Kurt and Blaine that I discuss here.

[6] Bryan and David are certainly more physically affectionate than previous gay couples on broadcast primetime television, but their expressions of love are still far fewer than those exhibited by heterosexual couples. Their kissing is limited to light touches of lips, and cuts to commercial breaks and pans to other images are often used when the two are being playful or affectionate in bed.

[7] Importantly, both Brady and Cheeks are played by openly gay actors, Sean Hemeon and Brad Bell (also creator and executive producer for the series). On other series with gay romance, at least one of the actors playing a gay character identifies as straight.

[8] This is, of course, a reiteration of the wage gap disparity between all men and women in the U.S.

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