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## Historicizing the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Queer Media

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## Historicizing the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Queer Media

### Overview and Rationale

I developed this assignment sequence for an upper-division LGBT literature and media course that I have taught since 2007. Students taking it typically have a great deal of enthusiasm for queer politics and media, and most have some knowledge of contemporary queer representations. However, their awareness doesn't often extend before the late 1990s. Students may regard pop culture texts as mere entertainment and have little experience in media studies. Lacking perspective and a framework for analysis, students may tend to uncritically accept *any* contemporary representations of queer characters as exemplifying increasing visibility, awareness, and acceptance. These factors can limit students' ability to critically analyze politics of representation in contemporary media.

This assignment sequence addresses these concerns. It gives students a framework of analysis by constructing a genealogy of queer representation before and after Stonewall and extending to today. This framework helps students to understand the history of queer representation in film and television and to appreciate its real-world stakes, which can include positive or negative effects on the self-image of queer viewers. Consequently, the assignment sequence encourages students to more historically informed, savvy and critical viewing of contemporary queer media representations.

Building on texts, short informal writings, and discussions (detailed below), students are given the following prompt for a midterm, 4-5 page essay. The topic invites to them to apply the concepts they have learned to a new situation:

“Choose a contemporary film or television show that represents LGBT people and issues. Analyze it according to the arguments made in *The Celluloid Closet*: that traditional Hollywood representations of LGBT people portray them as objects of laughter, pity, or fear, and that these representations didn't just reflect homophobia, but also created it. Is your film or show complicit with these patterns, or does it challenge them? If applicable, address whether or not your media text challenges or reinforces the more recent trend of 'homonormativity.' Be sure not to just summarize plot (which you will have to do for context and evidence), but move beyond plot summary into analysis of it.”

### Timeline

**Day One:** discuss *The Celluloid Closet*. The students can watch it before class, or it can be screened in class.

**Day Two (optional):** discuss internalized homophobia (short writing assignment), “Being Gay is Unnatural – Is It True?” (Byron Katie video – watch on YouTube before class), read Wikipedia article “Down-low (sexual slang).”

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**Day Three:** discuss Diane Raymond’s “Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective,” Frederik Dhanens’ “Teenage Queerness: Negotiating Heteronormativity in the Representation of Gay Teenagers in *Glee*,” Guillermo Avila-Saavedra’s “Nothin Queer About Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities.” Introduce the concept of homonormativity (Lisa Duggan). Discuss the television shows analyzed in the articles in terms of how they break from older, stereotypical patterns, yet also fall into homonormative portrayals.

**Day Four:** Discuss Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain* and the 2005 film adaptation. Focus on the story’s portrayal of the closet and internalized homophobia, but also on its status and reception as popular and critically acclaimed mainstream film. Evaluate its portrayal of gay men according to the framework of *The Celluloid Closet* and Duggan’s idea of homonormativity.

The essay prompt is provided ahead of time. I leave about 1-2 weeks between the end of this sequence and the essay due date for students to develop topics, discuss them with me, and get feedback on drafts.

### Lesson Plan

**Day One.** *The Celluloid Closet*: watching and discussing this documentary helps students understand the stereotypical, pre-1990s patterns of representing queer characters in film and begin to understand the real-world impacts of such representations. In class, we begin with a free-write on what they learned from the documentary – important points and especially disturbing examples. The discussion can be fairly unstructured (I usually do a round-robin method) as long as the central points of the documentary are made clear: that classic Hollywood films portrayed queer characters as objects of fear, pity, and laughter, and that such representations both reflected and created homophobia. We brainstorm more contemporary examples that conform to the documentary’s thesis or that contradict it, possibly portraying queer characters in more well-rounded, less stereotypical ways.

**Day Two.** This part of the assignment could be omitted if the class is particularly knowledgeable about issues facing queer people. However, I include it here as an option because I have seen over the years that students find learning about internalized oppression to be quite eye-opening and personally relevant. Having this knowledge helps them to understand older media portrayals of queer people, as well as the ongoing importance of media representation to the LGBT community.

Ask students to research the phenomenon of internalized homophobia before class and write a short summary of their findings. In short, internalized homophobia occurs when individuals incorporate and accept the social stigma surrounding homosexuality into their value system and conception of self. It can manifest in a number of ways, including mental health problems, substance abuse, negative attitudes toward other queer people, relationship problems, and suicide. In class, discuss the various manifestations and negative effects of internalized homophobia. Compare the Katie video – which dramatically shows an out-and-proud gay man realizing his residual self-hate and shame in a therapeutic setting – with living a secretive, double life “on the downlow.” Point out

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that the idea of “the downlow” originated in urban African-American communities, but has become a more general descriptor for having sex with men in secret. Gay male students in the class will likely have seen the term used on dating and hookup apps and websites.

Understanding the idea of internalized homophobia is key to fully appreciating the arguments of *The Celluloid Closet*, especially its thesis that classic Hollywood films “taught straight people what to think about gay people, and gay people what to think about themselves.” Help students to see that media representations showing queer characters as sick, dirty, and wrong could have the effect of making actual queer people feel that way about themselves and others. Ask students if they think the concept of internalized homophobia is still relevant today. They will likely conclude that as acceptance, visibility, and legal rights have grown for the LGBT community, sexual shame has greatly diminished, though the psychological effects of oppression persist, as evidenced by higher-than-average rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide in the queer population (Chakraborty, et al.) Later in the class, brainstorm some contemporary representations of queerness that are negative and/or stereotypical, as well as some that are more positive and affirming. Introduce the ideas of intersectionality and privilege, which complicate the model of internalized oppression as it relates to identity. Point out that living “on the downlow” would allow a man to keep his male privilege and keep a man of color from facing both racism and overt homophobia. Therefore, while closetedness may result from sexual shame, it also functions as a strategy to preserve privilege and avoid social stigma.

**Day Three:** The readings for today cover and analyze more recent queer media representations that are ostensibly more positive than older ones. There are three goals of the discussion: 1. To challenge the value of “visibility at any cost” and show that more representation does not always equal better representation; 2. To model for students how to critically analyze “low brow” pop cultural texts; 3. To introduce the idea of homonormativity as a framework for analyzing contemporary media representations.

*The Celluloid Closet* builds on Vito Russo’s landmark book and extends its thesis into the 1990s and the birth of new queer cinema, but stops there. Diane Raymond’s article, “Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective” (2003), critically examines queer characters in television from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Raymond identifies four patterns of representation: more gay characters, gay pretenders, the straight-mistaken for gay plotline, and a pattern of bisexual erasure. She concludes that these representations, while not overtly homophobic, nevertheless reinforce heteronormativity.

Guillermo Avila-Saavedra’s article, “Nothin Queer About Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities” (2009), examines texts from the early 2000s, especially around the “breakthrough” year of 2003: *Will and Grace*, *It’s All Relative*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. While these shows were widely celebrated for increasing queer media visibility, Avila-Saavedra concludes that “their discourse of gay identity is not disruptive of the heterosexual social order,” because it presents an image of queerness

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that is depoliticized and consumerist, as well as implicated in hegemonic ideologies of masculinity and racism.

Frederik Dhanens' article, "Teenage Queerness: Negotiating Heteronormativity in the Representation of Gay Teenagers in *Glee*" (2013), is a more recent essay that takes note of debates about queer representation in mainstream media, especially television: while we have seen more queer plotlines and rounded characters, their portrayals often serve to "consolidate the heterosexual matrix." He examines the television show *Glee* in these terms, arguing that it shows queer youth as, on one hand, victimized and conformist, but on the other, "happy, self-confident, and able to position themselves beyond the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix."

To frame the arguments of these essays, introduce students to Lisa Duggan's idea of homonormativity:

A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2003)

This framework has been used by media critics to analyze the political import of increasing queer media visibility in the last ten years. For example, Nathan Taylor argues that "A homonormative subject [supports] White, middle-class values such as consumerism, monogamy, and child rearing - a homonormative subject [does] not disrupt societal norms" (Taylor). There is an entertaining mock advertisement done for the Dutch Queeristan festival that is worth watching: it pretends to sell a drug called "homonormativity" that when taken, will turn one into a "good gay." Point out to students why homonormative representations matter: they do not challenge – in fact, they may reinforce - the patriarchal, misogynistic, and heteronormative social structures that underlie homophobia, and they exclude and stigmatize members of the queer community who are not white, affluent, cisgendered, gender-normative, able-bodied, and monogamous.

Ask the students to form groups, each group focusing on one the assigned essays. They are to find examples in the essay's analyses of queer portrayals that challenge older, stereotyped portrayals (using *The Celluloid Closet* framework for reference: gay characters as objects of fear, pity, or laughter). They are then to locate examples of homonormativity in the media portrayals that are analyzed. This exercise will hopefully show students that contemporary media visibility of queer characters and plotlines can challenge older, stereotyped patterns of representation, but at the same time and in other ways reinscribe normative values and ideologies.

**Day Four:** Have students read *Brokeback Mountain* before class. They can also watch the film version, or the instructor can arrange a screening. There are two goals in discussing this story: 1. to examine a fictional representation of the closet and

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internalized homophobia, and 2. to evaluate the story's politics of representation according to the conceptual frameworks laid out in previous class sessions, modeling the sort of analysis students are asked to do on their own for the essay assignment on a film or TV show of their choice.

Discussion of *Brokeback Mountain* can center around how it represents the pain and tragedy of living a closeted life. Because as a child Ennis witnessed the aftermath of a violent hate crime, he refuses Jack's efforts to build a life for them beyond yearly camping trips in the mountains. Moreover, both he and Jack exhibit many manifestations of internalized homophobia. They deny their orientation: after they have sex the first time, Ennis says "I ain't no queer" and Jack replies, "me either, a one-shot thing." They express regret for their same-sex desires: "I wish I could quit you." They marry women and start families, compartmentalizing their same-sex desires and shrouding them in secrecy. Neither marriage is happy, and Ennis's ends in divorce. They both abuse alcohol and are prone to violence.

Discussion can notice these elements of sexual shame, and also point out that Jack and Ennis's choices are determined by their position as white, working class men. They lack the education and economic freedom to leave their hard-scrabble, working-class rural environment, and acknowledging their sexual orientation would diminish the social capital that comes from their white and male privilege, possibly ending in death. Indeed, Jack is murdered at the end of the story – and it is strongly implied that he was killed because he was gay. Ennis is left alone, idealizing their time on Brokeback Mountain, but doomed to a grey and thwarted existence.

At this point, having unpacked the themes of the story, discussion can turn to locating it within the landscape of contemporary media portrayals. The film was successful and critically acclaimed, so begin by asking students why they think it appealed to mainstream audiences. Is this just another story of doomed and tragic gay people? On one hand, it is, but on the other the story differs from the stereotype for one key reason: sympathize with the Jack and Ennis. It is not their homosexuality or bisexuality that dooms them; the social context that prevents them from living openly that is at fault. Their love for each other is presented as good and pure; they exemplify the star-crossed-lovers paradigm. Moreover, by setting Jack and Ennis's love story within the natural setting of the rugged American west, the story associates male homosexuality with nature, freedom, beauty, Rousseau's idea of the "noble savage" uncorrupted by civilization – and even transcendence. As Proulx writes of Jack and Ennis:

There were only the two of them on the mountain, flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs and distant from tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours. (255)

At this point, shift discussion to reading the story through the lens of homonormativity. Note that the story and film received a mixed reception in the queer community. Ask the class if they think *Brokeback Mountain* is homonormative: does it reinforce

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heteronormative values regarding traditional gender roles, domesticity, and monogamy? For example, does Ennis and Jack's normative masculinity explain the story's popularity? That is, gay men are acceptable to mainstream audiences if they are manly? Point out that the story takes place from the early 1960s -1980s and shows little-to-no awareness of the complex, changing political and social context of homosexuality of that time. And while the story, by implication, blames culturally sanctioned homophobia for its tragedy, the overt cause of that tragedy lies within Ennis's fearful and conventional psychology, which is portrayed as a disastrous personal failing. Ask the class: should we celebrate the mainstream popular and critical success of a film featuring homosexual or bisexual characters that are white, male, apolitical, stereotypically masculine, handsome, played by popular, young, straight actors, psychologically damaged and tortured, closeted, and, in the end, dead?

To encourage a range of ideas, look also at the other side of the story's politics of representation. Locate the film in its historical moment: in the 2004 USA general election and until quite recently, same-sex marriage was used as a wedge issue to motivate the conservative Christian elements of the Republican party. How does the film version from 2005 portray same-sex love and desire in ways that could challenge assumptions underlying arguments against same-sex marriage? Notice that Jack and Ennis defy older stereotyped representations such as "the sissy." In fact, the story draws on the symbolic power of that archetypal symbol of American masculinity, power, and "rugged individualism" – the cowboy – to argue that homosexuality is natural and even "all-American." Compare queer representation in *Brokeback Mountain* with other media portrayals from the mid-2000s and beyond – *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Queer as Folk*, *Glee*, *Modern Family*. Point out that while homonormative representations may perform important political work on acceptance and visibility, they may do so at the price of reinforcing other forms of oppression and erasing non-normative modes of queer embodiment. Therefore, media critics must remain sensitive to the stakes and complexities of queer representation.

By this point, students hopefully understand the importance of representation to queer viewers, the historical patterns of representing queerness in film and television, and the relevance of analyzing politics of representation in contemporary media. These new understandings strongly position students to evaluate contemporary films and television shows that often feature more positive, developed portrayals of queer life, but may nevertheless fall into older, less empowering patterns or reinforce an exclusionary homonormativity.

### Teaching Materials

I provide students with the following prompts:

This week we will watch the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*. The thesis of this film is that Hollywood films from the 1930s through about the 1990s taught straight people what to think about gay people and taught gay people what to think about themselves. The lesson of these films was that gay people were worthy of fear, pity, or laughter. These

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filmic representations created and reinforced the homophobia that kept LGBT people closeted and oppressed.

The thesis of the documentary leads to the concept of internalized homophobia, which we will discuss with reference to *Brokeback Mountain*. I would like you to research internalized homophobia and write a short (about 2 pages typed, double spaced) summary of what you learned. Some questions to explore: what is internalized homophobia? What causes it? What are some of its effects on a gay person? How can it affect those around him/her (family, friends etc)? How can it be dealt with and possibly overcome? Have you had any personal experience with this phenomenon? We will discuss your findings.

Read the Raymond, Avila-Saavedra, and Dhanens articles. These media scholars analyze television representations of queer characters in the last ten years. Note where they postulate that these representations challenge older stereotyped representations, and also where they see these images as reinforcing a new “homonormativity.”

Here are some questions to think about for *Brokeback Mountain*:

How would you characterize Jack and Ennis’s relationship? What brings them together? What is their connection based on? What pulls them apart?

Where do you see manifestations of internalized homophobia in *Brokeback Mountain*?

What other reasons does the story give for Ennis’s reluctance to live openly with Jack?

The story was first published in 1997; the movie version came out in 2005. Is this just another story of tragic, doomed, unhappy gay people (as described in *The Celluloid Closet*)? Why or why not?

Why do you think this story was so popular, especially among the (mostly straight) movie-going audience? Does it challenge stereotypes, or reinforce them? Does it do both? Is this story homonormative?

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David Hennessee teaches British literature, world literature, and LGBT literature and media at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. His work has been published in *Dickens Studies Annual*, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, and in the recently-published volume *Activities for Teaching Gender and Sexuality in the University Classroom*. He is currently working on projects on asexuality in the novels of Jane Austen, and homophobic micro-aggressions in contemporary television shows.