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# Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre

Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow

□—*This paper explores how Will & Grace, which has been heralded in the popular press for its positive representations of gay men, situates the potentially controversial issue of homosexuality within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre. This paper draws on feminist and queer theory to examine the liabilities of relying on these familiar situation comedy conventions, demonstrating how the program equates gayness with a lack of masculinity, relies on sexual tension and delayed consummation, infantilizes the program's most potentially subversive characters, and emphasizes characters' interpersonal relationships rather than the characters' connection to the larger social world. Additionally it argues that by inviting mainstream audiences to read the program within familiar televisual frames, Will & Grace can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative.*

When *Will & Grace* took to the airwaves in September 1998, it broke new ground, offering the first gay male lead on U.S. broadcast television. By its third season, the situation comedy was one of 22 shows that portrayed gay or lesbian characters in leading, supporting or recurring roles (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defama-

tion, 2000). Since its premiere, *Will & Grace* has won numerous awards, including a People's Choice Award as Favorite New Comedy Series, a Golden Globe nomination for Best Comedy Series, an American Comedy Award nomination for Funniest Television Series, two GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards for Outstanding TV Comedy Series and a Founders Award from the Viewers for Quality Television. And during the 52nd annual Emmy Awards, *Will & Grace* was nominated in 11 categories, taking home awards for Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Supporting Actress, and Outstanding Supporting Actor.

The program follows the lives of Will Truman, a successful, attractive, Manhattan lawyer, and his best friend Grace Adler, a beautiful, self-employed, interior decorator. The two would

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make a perfect couple—and in fact, were college sweethearts—except for one barrier: Will is gay and Grace is straight. The two are in a constant search for lifelong mates, but the search has never turned up a relationship as special as the one that they share with each other. Their lives are complicated by two supporting characters, who are anything but typical. Karen Walker is a straight, wealthy socialite and alcoholic who works for Grace as her assistant because her life of leisure leaves her bored. Karen offers an appropriate counterpart for Will's friend, Jack. Jack is a flamboyantly gay, continually unemployed, self-described actor/dancer/choreographer.

As *Will & Grace* has found commercial success and critical acclaim, the U.S. remains embroiled in a number of struggles demonstrating the continued contentiousness of gay and lesbian issues within our heterosexist society. Three years after Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, the Vermont legislature passed a "civil unions" law, which legally recognized committed same-sex relationships. However, 34 states have enacted laws denying recognition of same-sex marriages in other states (George, 2001). After the Supreme Court ruled in a split 5-to-4 decision that the boy scouts did not have to accept gays or lesbians as employees or leaders, gay rights groups began pressuring sponsors and the government to withdraw funding from the organization. And three years after Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered by two men solely because of his sexuality, gays and lesbians are more visible in the media than ever before (Wyatt, 2000).

Given this cultural climate it is not surprising that just five years before *Will & Grace* debuted, Fejes and Pet-

rich (1993) predicted, "A regular network program with gay or lesbian main characters is far in the future" (p. 402).<sup>1</sup> At that time gay characters appeared only occasionally and generally in secondary roles. Later in the decade some were left wondering if ABC's 1998 cancellation of *Ellen*, whose character and actor simultaneously came out, would mean the death of gay characters in leading television roles (Sullivan, 1998). Instead of playing it safe after the controversies surrounding *Ellen*, NBC premiered *Will & Grace* the following fall. GLAAD applauded the show for presenting two different, yet likable, representations of gay men and for presenting their sexuality "simply as a part of who [Will and Jack] are as individuals." (1998). Other critics praised the show for dealing with gay subject matter and including explicit gay references. "[T]his was the first example of gay subject matter going totally mainstream, for there is nothing so mainstream—not Broadway, not movies, not novels—as *The Box*" (Holleran, 2000, p. 65).

Indeed, *Will & Grace's* appeal went beyond the small, niche gay market, attracting larger, mainstream<sup>2</sup> audiences. By the program's fourth week, it ranked number one in its timeslot in the highly lucrative 18–49 demographic (Jacobs, 1998). In its second season the show ranked among the 1999–2000 season's top 20 series (NBC, 2000). When *Will & Grace* went head-to-head with ABC's *Dharma & Greg*, a sitcom about a quirky heterosexual couple, the two networks found themselves competing for the same demographics and the same advertisers (Frankel, 2000). "All this mainstream success suggests that it appeals to viewers who might not ordinarily be inclined to watch a "queer" show"

(Gairola, 2001). This increased visibility is, for some, a sign of society's growing acceptance of the gay community. In an issue of *Entertainment Weekly* devoted to "Gay Hollywood," Benjamin Svetkey (2000) made this equation:

[T]oday, in 2000 A.D. (After DeGeneres), gay characters are so common on television, so unexotic, that their sexual orientation has become all but invisible to most viewers. It is, in a sense, the ultimate sign of acceptance . . ." (p. 26).

Implicit in these statements is that greater visibility equals greater social acceptance. However to say that *Will & Grace's* large audience, comprised of both gay and straight viewers, signals a cultural acceptance of the gay and lesbian lifestyle is premature. As Dow (2001) similarly points out in her analysis of *Ellen*, "saying the success of *Ellen's* initial coming out means the end of prejudice against gays and lesbians is like saying that the success of *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s signaled the end of racism" (p. 128; see also Gray, 1994; Lewis, 1991).

This paper takes a critical approach to examining portrayals of gay characters on television, rejecting the assumption that the mere representation of gay men in primetime television necessarily reflects a huge shift in societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians in America. Instead, we will argue that *Will & Grace* makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable to a large, mainstream television audience by situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre. Additionally, we will argue that by inviting viewers to read the program within familiar televisual frames, *Will & Grace* can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative.<sup>3</sup> Our paper will per-

form textual analysis of *Will & Grace* episodes from the 2000–2001 season to explore the liabilities of relying on familiar sitcom conventions. We will draw upon feminist and queer theory to demonstrate how the program continually positions gayness in opposition to masculinity, pairs its characters in familiar opposite-sex dyads, defuses the most outrageous characters' threats to heteronormativity, and emphasizes interpersonal relationships at the expense of gay politics.

### **Will the Tru-Man Please Stand Up: Gayness and Masculinity**

Before *Will & Grace* first premiered, GLAAD (1998) applauded the representations of Will and his more flamboyant sidekick, Jack, as "different types of gay men—both of which are valued within the community." Given the negative stereotypes of gay men that have been a part of television since its earliest years (Fejes & Petrich, 1993), the two gay characters on *Will & Grace* can be considered progressive. However, these two characters are positioned within a narrative space that relies on familiar comedic conventions for addressing homosexuality—equating gayness with a lack of masculinity. In Hollywood, homosexuality historically has been defined in opposition to masculinity; gayness is that which is not masculine (Russo, 1985, Epstein & Friedman, 1996). Comedic conventions of film and television have historically reinforced and poked fun at this stereotype of the gay man (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Dow, 2001). By relying on this conventional representational strategy, *Will & Grace* fails to challenge the heterosexist equation between homosexuality and that which is "not

masculine,” and in the process allows enough space in the narrative for viewers to read Will’s character as straight. Additionally, the program does not force viewers to question heteronormative assumptions of gender inversion. Gender inversion refers to the commonly held belief that homosexuals are oppositely gendered; a gay man is considered more feminine than a straight man and vice versa with a lesbian in contrast to a straight woman (Sedgewick, 1990).

The character of Will could be considered more threatening to an ideology of heteronormativity because he offers a different model for homosexuality. Unlike his feminized counterpart, Jack, Will fits well into a mainstream model of masculinity, being handsome, muscular, and physically fit. He mirrors the image of the “young, white, Caucasian . . . with a well muscled, smooth body, handsome face, good education, professional job, and high income” that advertisers purport as the model to which all gay men should aspire (Fejes, 2000, p. 115). This version of gay masculinity is in no way different from the same image being sold to heterosexual men. Will provides a mainstream audience with a likable, well-assimilated gay character that is very different from the negative stereotypes of gay characters in early television. However, his character has been criticized for confining the portrayal of gay men to those who are white and upper-middle class, making his character more acceptable to a mainstream heterosexual audience at the expense of alienating a large portion of the gay community (Gairola, 2001). And while some praise Will’s character as being positive and progressive, others have attacked the char-

acter for “not being gay enough” (Jacobs, 1998).

Rather than determining how “gay” Will is, a move that risks essentializing gay identity,<sup>4</sup> a more productive line of analysis is to consider how Will’s “gayness” is defined at specific moments in the text. In this case, it is significant that whenever *Will & Grace* specifically deals with Will’s sexuality the series falls back on the convention of feminizing Will. The November 23, 2000 (Greenstein & Burrows) episode provides the audience with the particulars of Will and Grace’s romantic relationship in college. While Will generally fits very well into a mainstream model of masculinity, this coming-out episode defines his gayness in opposition to heterosexual masculinity. A flashback introduces the audience to Will and Grace as college students, where they are attending a “kegger” in a dorm room. The camera scans a roomful of couples making out. The camera lingers on one couple as the man, kissing the woman, tells her “I am so into you.” As it pans to another couple kissing, the man also tells his girlfriend, “I am so into you.” Then the camera comes to a rest on Will and Grace, her sitting on his lap. He tells her, “I am so into those earrings.” Immediately, Will is defined as being different from (more feminine than) his masculine heterosexual college buddies. Will and his roommate eventually meet up at the keg and the audience is again exposed to Will’s more feminine concerns, asking his roommate if his “butt look[s] big in these jeans.” His roommate replies, “Dude, I’m a guy. I don’t know. Just get some pants that fit and leave me alone,” insinuating that Will is not a real “guy.”

Will is likewise effeminized in the episodes featuring his most significant

romantic relationship to date, with Matt, a sportscaster. As a sports fanatic, Matt is instantly marked as more masculine than Will. For their first date they meet at a sports bar, where the following exchange takes place (Poust, Kinally, & Burrows, 2000):

Matt: [To bartender] Two more please. [To Will] I love sports. I always wanted to be a sportscaster. I used to hold my mother's curling iron and pretend I was Howard Cosell.

Will: Funny. You know when I was a kid, I used to hold my mother's curling iron and pretend I was Eartha Kitt.

The marking of Will as feminine continues, as Will takes batting lessons from Grace because he believes that Matt broke up with his last boyfriend for not sharing his interest in sports. As Will discusses Grace's adventures re-decorating Jack's apartment, Grace looks on in disgust as Will misses every ball pitched to him by the machine, finally blurting out in frustration, "Hit the freaking ball you damn sissy!" Then Grace proceeds to show Will how to hit the ball, doing her best imitation of macho-style ball playing, finally instructing Will to get some snacks. The next scene finds Will and Grace back at their apartment, where Will asks Grace to admire his first "sports injury," a blister on his finger. Grace congratulates him and then tells him that she hopes that he didn't mind that they had to move to the "kiddie" area. She chides him for feeling like a man when he hit the clown, to which Will sheepishly agrees.

These episodes reinforce a definition of gayness as that which is not masculine, and even present gay masculinity as a "pale imitation" of heterosexual femininity, asserting the primacy of heterosexuality (Butler, 1991). Additionally, they preserve an essen-

tial heterosexuality within desire itself by emasculating Will in his relationship with the macho, sports-oriented Matt. Because Will is portrayed as more feminine in the episodes that focus on their relationship, the heteronormative understanding of desire—as existing between a masculine person and a feminine person—is upheld (Sedgewick, 1990). (Although, as will be discussed below, Will and Matt's relationship might be better understood as male bonding rather than actual desire.) Ironically, these episodes that demonstrate Will's gayness through gender inversion are the exceptions to how Will is generally portrayed. It is when the program must explicitly account for his homosexuality that he is defined as "not masculine."

If gayness is defined in this manner, then the usual oppositioning of Will and Jack is important. They are defined by their difference. They are contrasted by physical appearance, responsibility levels, and even the relationships that they pursue. Will is always in search of romance, desiring a man with whom he can share "His and His SUVs and 2.5 Jack Russell Terriers." Meanwhile, Jack juggles multiple boyfriends, continually flirting with nearly every man—gay or straight—with whom he comes in contact. Jack fulfills the stereotype of the flamboyant gay man and Will provides the norm of masculinity against which Jack's gayness is defined. "Even Will and his other friends poke fun at Jack's campiness, thus drawing a distinction between their 'straighter'-seeming gayness and Jack's overt 'queeniness'" (Gairola, 2001). Because the program repeatedly codes nonmasculine qualities as gay, then one must wonder about the sexual coding of masculine qualities, which is not made as clear. This allows Will's sexuality to be more ambiguous.

Additionally, Will's character, because it is defined against the flamboyant gay man, becomes a safer, better-assimilated portrayal of a gay man. He fits into the new masculine, asexual images of gays in the media that "in no way challenge the heteronormativity of mainstream society" (Fejes, 2000, p. 116).

### "Romantic" Comedy?

*Will & Grace* typically pairs its characters in opposite sex dyads. It is in these heterosocial (relationships between men and women) dyads that these characters find their most successful relationships. While all four characters interact with one another, there are clear bonds along heterosocial lines. Will and Grace are oftentimes positioned as a couple and Jack and Karen usually operate as "partners in crime." These pairings are represented in the program's opening sequence in which the characters stand in a line—Will, Grace, Karen, and Jack—visually framing the dominant character interactions on the program. Will and Grace are standing closer together, as are Jack and Karen, than are Grace and Karen, emphasizing their heterosocial pairings. Will and Jack, the two gay characters are farthest away from each other, signaling the absence of romantic tension in their relationship. Read alone, each of these relationships can be read positively as challenging typical representation of straights and gays, offering safe, caring relationships between both opposite and same sex dyads that do not lead to sex. Read against each other, however, and in terms of sitcom and popular cultural romantic conventions, these pairings can tell a different story. *Will & Grace* continually privileges heterosociality, while homosociality (relationships between same-sexed indi-

viduals) constantly fails or is safeguarded within the parameters of "male bonding" rather than same-sex desire.

A staple of the situation comedy, and of mainstream television and film in general, is the search for romance, many times played out as a battle of the sexes. Scodari (1995), for example, explores the spate of romantic situation comedies of the late 1980s as an adaptation of the screwball romances of the 1930s and 40s. These situation comedies find their humor in the playful interactions within the ostensibly egalitarian relationships between men and women who are either already in romantic relationships or in search of them. Oftentimes these relationships are played out in terms of a delayed consummation plotline. Originally the term applied to classical era Hollywood films in which sex before marriage was not permitted to be portrayed, leading to films that usually centered around the male lead's desire to consummate the relationship and the female lead's desire to get married. In between, a lot of playful barbs were exchanged between the couples (Epstein & Friedman, 1996). As Scodari has argued, television sitcoms adopted this type of plot, which in the weekly series format allows for a constant replay of the delay of consummation between the lead male and female characters. In fact, many working in the television industry argue that consummation often equals the death of the series as the dominant narrative tension that keeps viewers tuning in week after week disappears (Jacobs, 1998). *Will & Grace* offers the "ultimate twist" on the delayed consummation trope, separating potential lovers by sexual orientation. Armistead Maupin, whose book-turned-miniseries *Tales of the City* featured a gay man and straight woman,

acknowledges that the old obstacles of distance or class are no longer convincing to audiences: "The only thing you can come up with that keeps the lead actor and actress from doing it today is homosexuality" (quoted in Jacobs, 1998). By relying on this largely heterosexual romantic convention writers are able to tease audiences without fear of the post-consummation ratings drop. As its creators have acknowledged, *Will & Grace* likewise relies on this latest twist of the delayed consummation convention (Svetkey, 2000).

Will and Grace share an intimacy with one another that they cannot find in a sexual partner. They routinely perform roles associated with couples, particularly married heterosexual partners. They have lived together, arguing over matters of bathroom time and other mundane issues associated with marriage. In the third season premiere (Kohan, Mutchnick, & Burrows, 2000), when Will returns unexpectedly from an extended business trip overseas, he asks Grace, "Where's the love? I just flew coach." Grace jumps up into Will's arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and then hugs him from the behind. After their initial greeting Will explains to Grace why he decided to come back. "I missed you. I just felt every time you needed me I wasn't there." As the episode progresses, Will grows jealous over Grace and Jack's new found closeness. When Grace asks Will what she can do to reassure him that she has not replaced him with Jack, he responds, "I don't know. How about something like you need me more than anyone else. There's no one who could ever take my place. And that you promise when your last breath escapes you in this earthly life it will whisper my name. [In a whisper] 'Will.' But you know, in your own words."

After Grace assures Will that her affections are true, they share a kiss on the lips and an embrace.

Another episode (Barr & Burrows, 2001) deals with the provocative issue of gay marriage by having the four characters attend a commitment ceremony for their friends Joe and Larry. However, throughout the episode Will and Grace are clearly positioned as a shadow couple of Joe and Larry and it is their relationship that takes center stage. When Will and Grace meet Joe and Larry for dinner in New York, Joe looks fondly upon Will and Grace bickering over dessert, asking, "You guys are so cute together. Are we?" Then, Joe and Larry ask Will and Grace to do a reading together at their ceremony, further positioning them as a couple. As the episode progresses Grace is clearly being positioned as Will's wife, much to Will's resentment. While in the car ride on the way up to Vermont, the two continue to fight over money, prompting Karen to blurt in frustration, "Just climb on top of each other and get it over with already!" While meant as a joke, Karen's comment highlights the way in which the tension in Will and Grace's relationship closely resembles the sexual tension and bickering between heterosexuals in other sitcoms prior to the consummation of their relationships (e.g. Sam and Diane in *Cheers* or Rachel and Ross in *Friends*).

The two continue to bicker, until they are prompted to stand and perform their reading during the ceremony. As they recite the short poem about love, they begin to address each other, until finally they admit their love for each other and make up. On the one hand, this poem, which discusses the possession of infinite amounts of love, indicates that Will and Grace can love each other, and still have enough



love for potential romantic partners. The poem also suggests that fulfillment cannot be achieved through others, or at least, need not be achieved through a romantic partner. On the other hand, Will and Grace clearly get caught up in this reading designed to commemorate a marriage. Once they finish they turn to each other and confess their love to each other, each uttering the statement "I do." When finished, the guests applaud, and Will and Grace march down the aisle as if they are, in fact, the pair getting married. It is a gentle reminder from Joe and Larry that brings Will and Grace back to their seats, but only after the same sex union ceremony has become incidental to the vows exchanged between Will and Grace. In this way the program deflects attention from the potential threat posed by portraying gay marriage to a mainstream audience by focusing on the relationship between Will and Grace, who have been coded as a couple.

By pairing Will and Grace as the central dyad in the text, the program deftly escapes having to deal in a more overt matter with same-sex attraction. While heterosocial pairings are successful, the program does not allow the same success for homosocial relationships, which are often marked by a failure to communicate and achieve intimacy. This is especially true between Jack and Will, who are the only recurring gay characters on the program, but can rarely spend meaningful time together. Whatever time they do spend together is purposively devoid of any hint of sexual intimacy or attraction between the characters. On the one hand, this can be read as a positive representation because it demonstrates that gay men can form bonds that are not based solely on sexual intimacy.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the manner in

which any possible attraction between the characters is dealt with marks even the hint of same-sex intimacy as a perversion. Moreover, when considered in comparison to the romantic tension in Will and Grace's relationship, the lack of a similar tension between Jack and Will could be understood as a significant absence. As Fejes (2000) explains, "While in the past same sex desire and the males who practiced it were depicted as 'not really men' at best, and sick and depraved at worst, today representations of gay males in the media often separate same sex desire from the males who practice it, representing the latter in a positive, masculine, and upbeat manner while making the former invisible" (p. 116). While Jack and his desires are not invisible in the show, Will's frequently are; when they do appear are safely figured within the conventions of male bonding.

Occasionally the denial of desire between Will and Jack becomes quite explicit. During a visit to Psychic Sue (Palmer & Burrows, 2000), Will is told that he already knows the man with whom he will spend the rest of his life, and that his name begins with the letter "J." In this humorous scene we see Will pondering over whom he currently knows whose name begins with the letter "J," the audience knowing, of course, that Psychic Sue is speaking of Jack, whose name she finally blurts out, much to the horror of Will. The rest of the episode focuses on Will's revulsion of the idea, which is explored through a series of humorous interludes between him and Jack, leading to a playful reenactment of a standard "honey, I'm home" scene common to the imagining of domestic sitcom life. Will arrives home and is greeted by Jack emerging from the

bathroom greeting him with an ironic “Hi honey.”

Will: [Clearly upset] What are you doing here?

Jack: Calm down, I was just using your tub [pause] and your ylang ylang. [Jumping towards Will] You like? You like?

Will: Why don't you leave, you leave.

Jack: Why are you so crabby? Bad day at the office?

Will: No, I just wanted to come home and not to Madame Butterfly.

Jack: [approaching Will]: Helloooo gorgeous suit. Where did we get this, huh? [He runs his fingers up Will's arm and then moves behind him, grabbing him.] Nice. The shoulders, the pecs, the pits, the waist. Woo!

Will: [Breaks away from Jack in horror and blurts out.] I AM NOT HAVING SEX WITH YOU!!

Jack: [Shocked] WHAT!

Will: I am never having sex with you. We are never having sex. Sex with you, NO!

Jack: Oh, you poor thing. That wasn't sex. Alright, how can I explain this [pauses as he moves closer to Will] When two men are in love and committed and greased up like two pigs at a county fair . . .

Will: NO! Psychic Sue said I'm going to spend my life with a man named Jack.

Jack: Jack who?

Will: Jack you.

Jack: Jack me?

Will: No THANKS! [Voice goes up on thanks. Looking perturbed, he moves next to Jack.] You know ordinarily I wouldn't believe all this psychic stuff, but she's been right about everything else . . . [pause] . . . What if she's right about this? [Both walk to opposite ends of the room].

Jack: Well, what if she is right [looking somewhat horrified]?

Will: I wonder what that is going to be like.

Jack: I'm gonna [stuttering slightly] have to have my own place.

Will: Sex is out of the question. I don't even like to see your head poke through your sweater.

This scene offers an extreme play on the denial of possible consummation of a relationship between same-sex friends. The scene, played ironically within the format of a sitcom marriage, with the husband coming home after a long day at work to a feminine, stay-at-home wife who is making herself presentable for her tired husband, is one that will be familiar to most situation comedy viewers. What makes it strange (and humorous) is that two men perform the role of husband and wife. The disruption caused to this domestic scene is handled with absolute denial of any same-sex affection or erotic desire, as played through a culturally-constructed revulsion against gay male sex. Will's revulsion at Jack's touch mirrors similar homophobic scenes played over and over again in films and in television. It is telling, for example, that Will's outburst of revulsion comes when Jack is grabbing him from behind, a position that suggests anal intercourse. When Grace touches Will from behind in the episode discussed above (Kohan, Mutchnick, & Burrows, 2000), it is in no way threatening. Will's outburst, in fact, amounts to what can be seen as a hysterical denial of same-sex desire. At the same time, in an ironic twist, the idea of same-sex relationships can only be imagined through the conventions of heterosexual relationships, thus underscoring that heterosexuality is at the root of all desire.<sup>6</sup> The most curious statement in this exchange, however, comes from Jack, who, when trying to explain sex to Will, says that two men should be in love and committed. This is a strange comment for Jack to make, as he is frequently portrayed as having mul-

tiple sexual partners and is devoid of any desire for a long-term stable relationship. This comment, however, allows gay sex to be safely figured in conventional heterosexual terms of emotional intimacy, thus de-eroticizing the gay male sexual act. The second part of the comment, "greased up like two pigs at a county fair," simultaneously marks homosexuality as deviant. Here we have a catch-22: in a heteronormative system of gender and sex relationships, same sex desire must be denied or marked as deviant; at the same time, if it must be imagined it can only be done so through heteronormative social and cultural conventions.

After receiving much criticism for Will's apparent asexuality, the program's creators introduced a more serious love interest for Will. However, instead of allowing the audience to see the development of a sexual relationship between two male characters, the relationship is safely figured within the convention of "male bonding." Their first date takes place in a sports bar (Poust, Kinally, & Burrows, 2001). During this scene, Matt mentions that he plays weekend ball with some "buddies," a term more typically associated with heterosexual male bonding. The two play basketball together, which ends in a locker room scene during which Will finally confesses his disinterest in sports. This locker room scene is potentially threatening due to the common homophobic fear of gay men staring at straight men, and indeed the scene can be read as a direct and provocative challenge to this fear. However, this locker room scene, and one from the following episode (Kohan, Mutchnick, & Burrows, 2001), also works to safely contain any threat of desire between the two male characters by placing it within the safer sphere

of heterosexual male bonding. When they embrace, it is devoid of apparent romantic affection, and their hugs frequently end with shoulder pats, or other gestures that read more like male bonding.

Relying on the convention of male bonding to frame potential male-to-male desire allows for a safe representation of homosexuality at a time when the portrayal of gay desire on broadcast television is generally accompanied by disclaimers and advertiser wariness. However, the de-eroticization or total erasure of same-sex desire in a text that does not de-eroticize or erase heterosexual desire<sup>7</sup> fails to challenge the homophobic sanction against same-sex desire.

Generally, *Will & Grace's* funniest and most outrageous moments come not from the two leading characters, but from the two supporting characters, Karen and Jack. Both characters continually call into question the assumptions and beliefs of a heterosexist culture through their dialogue and actions. However, the potential social critique offered by these characters for a mainstream audience is often contained by their position within the sitcom narrative structure. Situation comedies feature stable recurring casts of characters who rarely remember events from previous episodes, and who hardly ever achieve personal growth, instead occupying a particular slot in the sitcom narrative: father, mother, best friend, precocious child, buffoon, etc. Thus, the situation comedy relies on a set of domestic and familial-like relationships to structure the narrative slots available to characters in the program. Even when programs do not take place within a family or home, the setting still functions as a surrogate home and the characters relate to each

other as part of a family (MacDonald, 1979; Newcomb, 1974). We see this in *Will & Grace* as Jack and Karen are continually infantilized, occupying the slot of children to Will and Grace's narrative slots as parents. For example, in two episodes during the 2000–2001 season, the four characters appear together in automobiles. In each case, Will and Grace sit up front, acting as de-facto parents to Jack and Karen, who sit in the back seat and remain oblivious to where they are going, concerned only with their own desires. In one episode (Rosenstock & Burrows, 2000), Will and Grace enter her office to find Karen talking dirty on the phone. When she sees them, she says, "Crap, I gotta go. Mom and Mom are home." While each character calls into question dominant cultural ideologies regarding gender and sexuality, this is limited by their placement in the narrative.

Karen can be read as calling into question those roles generally associated with being a woman—supportive mother, friend and wife. In one episode (Palmer & Burrows, 2001), Karen's stepson, Mason, wins a spot on his school's swim team, and Jack chides Karen for not attending any of the meets. Feeling guilty, Karen attends, but with a large plastic cup full of booze in hand. She argues with the other mothers who chide her for her bad mothering skills. As Mason competes, Karen cheers him on, yelling, "Go! Go! Honey, Swim! Swim! I know you can do it. Hey! Hey, if you win, tonight I'll let you watch the Spice Channel! [To another mother] That lit a fire under the horny little monkey!" Karen even sexualizes the most basic maternal behavior when she sees it. In the November 23, 2000 (Greenstein & Burrows) episode, when the group is

sitting in a bar, the camera frames a two-shot of Grace and Karen. Karen is looking across the room at someone out of the camera's frame. She pulls down her shirt to reveal her cleavage. Grace looks on horrified and asks Karen why she is doing this. Karen's childish reply is "She started it," to which Grace emphatically responds, "SHE'S NURSING!" Karen, proving her inability to recognize such maternal behavior is left to respond, "Oh, well that explains the little bald man."

Karen also rejects the role of comforter, which again leads to the failure of any homosocial bonding. In many scenes Karen proves that she is incapable of offering real emotional comfort to any of the characters, instead she remains primarily concerned with fulfilling her own desires. Moreover, Karen challenges traditional ideologies about marriage, making it clear that her marriage is based on an exchange model. She gives her husband sex and he gives her all the money she wants. She views marriage as a contractual obligation that must be fulfilled, not as a loving relationship between two people, and thus not through the heterosexual ideology of romance. In the February 8, 2001 (Kohan, Mutchnick, & Burrows, 2001) episode, Karen and Jack go to the bank so that Karen can take out some jewels from her safe deposit box to attend a charity ball. Fondling the jewels, she says to Jack, "Looking at all of these jewels. Stan has been so good to me honey. [Picking up the jewels one at a time.] On my knees in Belize. On my back in Iraq. Oh, and then there was that time in Nantucket. [She and Jack both giggle.] Oh, good times . . . Well, good jewels anyway."

Karen provides a delightfully funny character who rejects all traditional ideologies about what it means to be a

woman—failing at even the most basic maternal level, putting herself before all others, and rejecting any notions of marriage as anything more than an exchange of sex for money. In this way, Karen could be read as challenging the dominant gender structure and sexist and heterosexist assumptions. One popular press critic calls her “the only really gay character on the sitcom” (Holleran, 2000). However, she is such an extreme character that the sheer audacity of her words and actions can safely diffuse any potential threat she may offer. Karen’s comments are generally followed by audience/laugh track laughter demonstrating that she is a screwball character not to be taken seriously. Additionally, the more mainstream characters, Will and Grace, offer reactions that demonstrate how over-the-top she actually is. In the breastfeeding example offered above, Grace is horrified by Karen’s behavior. After Karen’s final comment about “the little bald man,” Will redirects attention back to his story by beginning, “ANYWAY . . .” as if to completely dismiss Karen. While Karen might offer a gay sensibility for some of the program’s viewers, her position within the familiar role of child or buffoon within the situation comedy narrative means that such a sensibility need not be taken seriously by the mainstream audience.

Jack’s character can also be read as threatening traditional categories of gender and sexuality. He constantly objectifies other men, refusing to conform to any traditional notions of masculinity. He acknowledges that he doesn’t “pay attention to the straight world,” and certainly lives in a world of his own. However, Jack also is infantilized by the more stable characters. Like Karen, Jack is continually scolded

by Will and Grace. The camera routinely cuts to Will and Grace for reaction shots, which typically involve a shaking of the head or rolling of the eyes to demonstrate that Jack is not to be taken seriously.

Jack’s character is more complicated than this, though, because of the possibility that he can be read as camp. “This classic gay (male) strategy of subversion is camp – an ironic stance toward the straight world rooted in a gay sensibility” (Gross, 1989, p. 143). Therefore, Jack’s exaggerated behavior could be read as a critique of mainstream culture. However, as John Fiske (1987) argues, jokes function to open up the meaning of a text “through a collision of discourses” (p. 87). The script of *Will & Grace* cannot control the meaning that audiences make of jokes about Jack’s performances. So, while Jack is a likable character who provides an alternative to heterosexual masculinity, the polysemic nature of joking allows audiences to either laugh *with* Jack or *at* Jack. In fact, this ambiguity of meaning is necessary in a prime time television text attempting to reach a large audience.<sup>8</sup> And because Jack’s performance of gayness fits within a historical framework of media images that make homosexuality the focus of humor, his character can also be read as upholding heterosexism. When the studio audience roars as Will refers to Jack as “Mrs. Jack McFarland,” the pleasure comes from an understanding of the “sissy,” or the “queen.” If viewers agree to position themselves in a way that recognizes these stereotypes of gay men, they get the payoff—the laugh and the pleasure it brings.

Jack and Karen provide much of the humor on *Will & Grace* and are allowed to do and say things the more palatable main characters aren’t. This

is due, in large part, to their positions within the narrative structure of the sitcom. As “children” or “buffoons,” Jack and Karen can say and do as they please because their positioning within the narrative structure indicates that they are not to be taken seriously.

### The Personal, Not the Political

Perhaps the most limiting convention of the situation comedy, and one that also makes it a safe space for the exploration of controversial topics, is the genre’s emphasis on interpersonal relationships between characters rather than their relationship to the outside world. The effect of this in *Will & Grace* is to depoliticize gayness in two important ways. First, when the program explicitly deals with the question of sexuality, it falls back on the convention of treating homosexuality as a problem, especially for straight characters in the narrative. Second, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships prevents a consideration of gay politics and leads to a failure to acknowledge the social consequences of gay and lesbian persons living in our heterosexist culture. Dow (2001) recently argued that these were particular pitfalls of the way homosexuality was dealt with in *Will & Grace*’s predecessor sitcom, *Ellen*.

Stories that specifically confront the issue of homosexuality frequently do so through the common cultural convention of presenting it primarily as a problem for the heterosexual characters (Dow, 2001; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1989). This is the case in *Will & Grace*, where Grace is the one who must deal with the problems raised by Will’s sexuality. A particularly poignant example of this comes during

the coming-out episode (Greenstein & Burrows, 2000). What might have been a story exploring the range of emotions that accompany this experience, the story revolves around Grace’s reaction to Will’s revelation and her pain. This is indicated right from the beginning of the episode when the four characters, out for dinner, encounter a woman at a bar upset because of relationship problems with her boyfriend. The group quickly realizes that this is because her boyfriend is gay. To help her figure this out, Will and Grace recount their own experience, which is told in a series of flashbacks to their college years, when they were dating. Feeling hopeful about their future together, Grace invites Will home for Thanksgiving, hoping that they will finally consummate their relationship. While trying to get Will to kiss her in bed, Will stalls by mistakenly proposing marriage to her, forcing himself to come out to her before she begins planning their future together. This leads to Grace’s breakdown and estrangement from Will. Later in the episode, Grace learns that during the year that they didn’t speak, Will slept with another woman, just to make sure that he wasn’t sexually attracted to the opposite sex. Feeling hurt, she leaves, forcing Will to follow her, and to comfort her and reassure her that he loves her. Thus, the episode doesn’t deal with the social consequences that Will faced by admitting his homosexuality. Instead, it frames Will’s coming out as a decision for which Grace paid the consequence.

Homosexuality is likewise posed as a particular burden for Grace in the episode where Will breaks off his relationship with Matt due to Matt’s refusal to come out of the closet in his workplace (Kohan, Mutchnick, & Burrows, 2001). The voice for social change

in this episode is Grace's, but her voice says that social change is the personal responsibility of gays and lesbians, not of the larger society. Throughout this episode it is Grace who advises that Will end the relationship, insisting that he live an honest and open life and, by inference, insisting that all gay persons should do so. The episode begins with Will watching Matt cover a basketball game on television. When he goes down to the stadium to see Matt after the game, he meets Matt's boss. Matt introduces Will as his brother, thus indicating his desire to not reveal his sexual preference to his employers. Will is extremely angry, and when he tells Grace, she tells him to break up with him. When Will reports his conversation to Grace, he states the following: "I just said I'm an out and proud gay man. I'm not about to go back in the closet for the sake of relationship." Grace responds with emphasis, "Oh, that is so good! And it's so right! We're here, we're queer and he better get used to it [waving a spoon above her head]." Then Will sheepishly admits to not breaking off the relationship because Matt "said he likes me." This scene clearly indicates that Grace is more willing to stick by her guns than is Will.

Later, Will invites Grace to join him and Matt at an out-of-the-way fish restaurant in Queens where he and Matt can be safe from being recognized, and though she shows up at the restaurant, she refuses to join them, explaining that "I've thought about it and I cannot in good conscience have dinner with you two, I'm not going to be a party to your lie." While she waits for her "killer onion blossom" Will attempts to return to his dinner with Matt, but is distracted by Grace's disapproving looks. When he confronts her about it, she

responds, "Look if you're feeling guilty because your compromising everything you believe in, that's your thing. Don't put that on me. I'm just standing here thinking about clam strips, which is moot because they're all out. Out and Proud [smug look]."

Will again attempts to return to his dinner with Matt, only this time they are interrupted by Matt's homophobic boss, Harry. Harry tells Matt that he has spent the day fighting rumors that Matt is gay to which Matt sheepishly responds that "the idea of two guys together . . . creeps me out". Will boldly responds, "I think two guys together is hot." Following the charade that he is Matt's brother, Will "comes out" to Matt and Harry and, addressing Matt, says "I can't go on lying. I know I said I would and I'm sorry, but I can't. The only way I know how to be in a relationship with you, [looking at Harry] *brother*, is if we are open and honest. Those are the terms. Can you accept that?" Grace applauds Will's adamant stance.

The "lesson" of this episode is that gay men should live their lives out of the closet. The "problem" is that it is his "straight" friend Grace who has to remind him of this. It is Grace—an unmarked, middle-upper-class, white, heterosexual woman—who seems to suffer the burden or consequences of Will's sexuality and his choice of disclosing it or not. Drawing on the cultural convention of treating homosexuality as a personal rather than political issue, *Will & Grace* also does not take into account the social consequences of a gay man outing himself in a potentially homophobic profession.<sup>9</sup> It assumes a "post-gay" rights environment in which publicly acknowledging one's homosexuality carries no social consequences and denies that this marking

matters in the lives of gays and lesbians. This episode implicitly lets the audience know that Harry's homophobia is wrong, but it also suggests that Harry's views are personal, rather than cultural, while Matt's decision not to come out on the job is similarly treated as a personal failure rather than as a painful decision reflecting the realities of our heteronormative culture.

### Conclusion

*Will & Grace* is a potentially subversive program that portrays male homosexuality in a way that many different audiences can identify with, appreciate, and enjoy. One of the program's co-creators, David Kohan, is very open about the fact that *Will & Grace* is an attempt to reach a wide demographic and not to educate the American public about gay life:

We never really set out to make a *gay* show . . . we were just trying to come up with something original, to mine a dynamic that hadn't already been mined on TV. And we came up with the idea of a gay man and his relationship with a straight woman. It was something we hadn't seen on TV before, a fresh approach to romantic comedy. (Svetkey, 2000, p. 28)

When considered from the perspective of visibility, this "fresh approach" represents an important shift in popular culture representations of homosexuality. By placing an out gay man, who is comfortable with his sexuality, as the star of a primetime, broadcast television series, *Will & Grace* presents the idea of social acceptance of gays and lesbians as a positive one. It is important to recognize that it is popular culture conventions that help make gay and lesbian characters palatable for a mainstream audience, thus, creating the space for increased media visibility of gays and lesbians.

Yet, visibility alone cannot serve as the framework from which to evaluate the program. As Bonnie Dow (2001) argued regarding *Ellen*, visibility on the television screen does not necessarily signal a shift in dominant social attitudes towards gays and lesbians. After all, as the program's creators and others have admitted, the pairing of a gay man and straight woman at the center of a narrative has as much to do with the exhaustion of the delayed consummation narrative on television series than with any attempts to contribute to social acceptance of gays and lesbians. It is important to remember that visibility often comes with the price of having to conform to or be made sense of within dominant cultural discourses (Dow, 2001; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993). To become visible is to enter into a dominant discourse that marks the boundaries of normalcy—which in contemporary U.S. society means hetero-normalcy. As this paper has argued, in the case of *Will & Grace*, the representation of gayness enters the realm of heteronormativity through its reliance on certain popular culture conventions that historically have reinforced, at the least, heterosexism and, at worst, homophobia. *Will & Grace* makes homosexuality safe for broadcast television audiences by framing its characters within the familiar popular culture convention that equates gayness with a lack of masculinity and through the familiar situation comedy genre conventions of romantic comedy and delayed consummation, infantilization, and an emphasis on characters' interpersonal relationships rather than the characters' connections to the larger social world. Taken together, these conventions work to confine homosexuality within its paradoxical position in dominant heteronormative dis-



courses; homosexuality can only be represented through heterosexist categories and language, while at the same time it is marked as a deviation from the norm.

Regardless of the positive intentions of the program's producers and actors, and regardless of viewers' capacity for multiple readings of the text, these conventions, combined with the weight of the dominant discourse of heteronormativity, set boundaries for the mainstream representation of male homosexuality. Such conventions guide, but do not wholly determine, viewers' expectations of and experiences with popular culture texts. For the mainstream audience, *Will & Grace* offers a potential glimpse into a world with which many viewers might not have first hand experience. For gay audiences the program offers a space for identification and self-construction. However, the conventional emphasis on interpersonal relationships and personal responsibility possibly encourages straight audiences to believe that we have entered a "post-gay" period in which the struggle for gay rights has already been won and that an individual's personal rejection of homophobic attitudes equals the improved social standing of sexual minorities. Viewers are congratulated for their acceptance of gays and lesbians, but without any real consideration of the compromised

lives of gays and lesbians within our heteronormative culture. This possibility is one that media critics should be attendant to in their research on reception of television programs featuring gay and lesbian characters.

As gay characters become more common on broadcast and cable television, it will be tempting to equate this increased visibility with social acceptance and valuation of gays and lesbians. Therefore, media critics need to continually interrogate the assumption that a quantitative increase in gay representations (increased visibility) signals a qualitative change in representational practices. Qualitative challenges to current representational conventions, which have the power to call into question normative cultural ideas, serve as a more powerful indication of and contribution to social change. Instead of looking at numbers as a sign of social progress, critics should look for ways in which gays and lesbians are represented in popular culture texts targeted to a broad audience, and how such representations conform to and challenge normative structures of our heterosexist society. As the case of *Will and Grace* suggests, the mere presence of gay characters on broadcast television, even in leading roles, does not necessarily represent a challenge to the dominant norms of U.S. culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a more extensive history of the representations of gays and lesbians on television, see Dow (2001) and Fejes & Petrich (1993).

<sup>2</sup>We use the word "mainstream" here with some caution. We understand that the proliferation of cable channels in the 1990s ushered in an age of narrow-casting, in which networks target particular demographics, especially those that are most desirable to advertisers. This shift ended the days when the majority of the U.S. population tuned into one of only three networks. NBC targets *Will & Grace* to an audience of young, educated professionals, of whom most are presumably straight. Thus, the audience for *Will and Grace* is not necessarily a large portion of the U.S. public. However, we believe that the four major networks continue to symbolically represent the "mainstream" of U.S. culture. The appearance of previously marginalized representations on

broadcast television (“the big four”) is considered by many to indicate movement of certain ideas into this “mainstream,” as demonstrated by popular press television critics’ use of the term (Gairola, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Heteronormativity refers to the discourses and practices by which heterosexuality is constituted as the natural and compulsory norm, against which homosexuality is defined as its binary, and hence, negative opposite (See Butler, 1991, 1993a,b; De Lauretis, 1984, 1991; Foucault, 1978; Warner 1993).

<sup>4</sup>Feminist media scholars, embracing performative theory, have worked to move beyond analysis of stereotyped characters in narratives and models in advertising that look for distortions in representation of women. van Zoonen (1994) recognizes the problematic nature of simply arguing against stereotypes: “Before media could translate more realistic images of women, it would be necessary to define incontrovertibly what the reality about women is” (p. 31). That is to say, in rejecting an essentialist model of gender, it is an impossible task to ascertain which representations are “truer” or “more authentic” than others. This would be an equally impossible project for determining “realistic” images of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered people.

<sup>5</sup>Thank you to Bonnie Dow and the two anonymous reviewers for pointing out this reading of Will and Jack’s relationship.

<sup>6</sup>An important project for queer theorists has been a thoroughgoing critique of the ways in which heterosexual norms are used to make sense of and define gay and lesbian categories and experiences. Warner (1993) writes that a particular pitfall of theorizing queer sexuality is that the theoretical language in questions can specify sexual identities only in ways that produce the ideology of heterosexual society. Bonnie Dow (2001) writes that “the romantic narrative of autonomy and liberation that undergirds the rhetoric of *Ellen* allows it to be celebrated by gays and straights alike. For many gays, the fiction of personal authenticity and control provides psychological comfort in a deeply homophobic culture; for sympathetic straights, this narrative facilitates blindness toward the heterosexism and homophobia in which they are complicit and from which they benefit.”

<sup>7</sup>Grace talks explicitly about her sexual relationships with men, and viewers have seen her in bed with at least one of her boyfriends.

<sup>8</sup>Norma Schulman (1995) found the success of *In Living Color* (a program produced by, written by, and primarily performed by blacks) came not simply from its camp humor about race relations in America, but from its ambiguity, which “gives it bimodal appeal—a quality deemed all important in a commercial medium for whom the aggregate minority viewing audience is insufficient in itself to garner the kind of ratings that yield substantial revenue” (p. 438).

<sup>9</sup>Bonnie Dow convincingly argues *Ellen* used the same kinds of strategies in dealing with the possible political consequences of her “coming out.” In fact, when it comes to explicitly dealing with the relationship between homosexuality and the broader political culture, *Will & Grace* clearly follows the conventions that were used in *Ellen*.

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