GAY MALE AND LESBIAN YOUTH IN THE AMERICAN (TV) FAMILY: UNDERSTANDING THEIR REPRESENTATION ON U.S. TELEVISION IN THE EARLY 2000s

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ABSTRACT

TARA MARIE KACHGAL: Gay male and lesbian youth in the American (TV) family: Understanding their representation on U.S. television in the early 2000s (Under the direction of Jane D. Brown, Ph.D.)

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand TV programming from the early 2000s that was positioned as addressing the important issues faced by gay male and lesbian youth and their families in the United States. With an emphasis on writers, producers, network executives and on fan and advocacy groups, the chapters examine specific efforts by these “insiders” and “outsiders” to work within television’s genre codes and socioeconomic infrastructure to redress the stigma of youth homosexuality. Using a case study approach, three texts are examined: a made-for-TV movie, The Truth About Jane, that premiered on the cable channel Lifetime in 2000; a storyline involving Bianca Montgomery on the ABC soap opera, All My Children, from 2002–2005; and the Chicago (2002) season of The Real World.

Each chapter investigates how the implicit goal of both groups is often constrained by factors ranging from perceptions of what the audience, networks, and sponsors are “ready for” to an investment in using a specific visibility strategy (mainstreaming) to promote gay rights. A key argument is that the liberal efforts of both groups were often compromised because they did not critically interrogate core assumptions about gender and sexual norms, tolerance, and acceptance.
Finally, how these three texts and others addressing issues faced by gay youth and adults, and their respective families, were embedded in the broader cultural politics of the early-to-mid-2000s is considered. How these texts were inserted in, and framed by, debates over gay rights in various spheres such as marriage and parenting is delineated, showing that the backlash to gay rights claims that was seen in the broader political sphere was sometimes enacted by and through television. The final chapter also scrutinizes the mutually dependent relationship between TV makers and media advocacy groups, asking whether this constrains not only representational possibilities afforded to gay male and lesbian youth but the potential for social and political change.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The very idea of The Real World when we pitched it to MTV in 1992 was putting seven diverse [young] people into a house. It almost requires having a gay or lesbian just as it requires having a black or Latino person. -- Jonathan Murray, Co-creator and Executive Producer of the influential reality series (as cited in Meers, 2002, para 17)

This sense that television can and should depict youth homosexuality marks a radical shift from the 1980s and before, when, to a large extent, heterosexuality was “exclusive and explicit,” and homosexuality was considered too taboo to depict in youth-targeted programming (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992, p. 360). This is not to say that lesbian and gay youth were entirely absent from U.S. television. When they were featured, though, gay

\[1 \text{ Designed as a "social experiment" to investigate "what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real," The Real World brings together seven late teens and 20-somethings to live together for six months, under almost total surveillance and continual taping and with almost no privacy. A key part of the premise involves the inclusion of young people across different modalities of race, gender, sexuality, class, geography, and, sometimes, nation. "Diversity is what makes our story," explained Murray (as cited in Sharkey, 1997, para 5).}

\[2 \text{ Joyrich (2001) argues that the history of homosexuality on U.S. television is not one of absence but of repression. Homosexuality has always been represented, but in various ways. In their overview of four decades of U.S. television, Fejes and Petrich (1993) provide an illustration of Joyrich’s argument.} \]
youth were relegated to short-term appearances, usually in single episodes of series or movies of the week. And, representations continued the problematic association of homosexuality — especially, youth homosexuality — with pathology, deviance, and sickness, and as an unfulfilling “lifestyle choice” (Tropiano, 2002).³

These infrequently appearing characters functioned as a "provisional dramatic device, a point of conflict to be solved away" (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992, p. 360). A lesbian high school student being harassed at school in an episode of the high school drama 21 Jumpstreet or a teenage boy undergoing a “sexual identity crisis” in a medical drama such as Marcus Welby, M.D., presented a scenario that allowed for straight characters to come to the rescue and, at the same time, teach the audience a lesson about tolerance. Their images fleeting, lesbian and gay youth were limited to playing the "confused teen," "situational homosexual," and the "assimilated gay" (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992, p. 362). Furthermore, almost all portrayals were of white, middle- to upper-class, gay male youth, ignoring the existence of poor or working-class, nonwhite, and/or lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth.

The Real World came about at a time when academic and public policy reports announced that gay youth were coming out in higher numbers, and earlier, too.⁴ The

³ As Tropiano (2002) noted, the medical dramas of the 1970s, for example, responded to the gradual destigmatization of homosexuality, including its declassification as a mental disorder, with what seemed like more sympathetic depictions. Yet, although youth homosexuality was no longer termed a disease, it was still equated with social ills, such as alcoholism, mental disease, and drug addiction. Youth homosexuality was still characterized as a sickness and as something that anguishes teen characters.

⁴ Research published in the 1990s indicated that adolescents were confronting sexual identity issues at ever-earlier ages, even in late childhood and early adolescence. And, many were not only experiencing same-sex attraction, but declaring an identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (Herdt & Boxer, 1996; Rosario & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1996; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). This works contrasts with earlier (retrospective) research, which indicated that the coming out age was between the ages 19 to 21 years for males and 21 to 23 for
premiere of the long-running docusoap in 1992 occurred in tandem with, and, no doubt, contributed to the sighting of “gay youth” in the public’s imagination. A 1993 *Newsweek* article, for example, attributed "media fascination with sexual athleticism and androgynous pop icons" and more cultural acceptance, including gay organizations in schools, with teens “experimenting more openly with gay and bi-sexuality” (Gelman & Rosenberg, 1993, para 6). “We're teen, we're queer, and we've got e-mail” was the headline of an article appearing in *Wired* the following year that also spoke of empowered gay youth (Silberman, 1994).

*The Real World* illustrates the reciprocal nature of the relationship between television, reality, and the representation of reality. With many of its seasons including one gay, lesbian, or bisexual cast member, *The Real World*, in turn, has often been credited for “normalizing” youth homosexuality among audiences and those in the TV industry, and with helping to make the gay teen a stock character on U.S. television by the late 1990s. Epstein (1999) noted that youth-targeted programs as wide-ranging as *Felicity*, *Dawson's Creek*, *That '70s Show*, *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; and *All My Children* had all featured “positive” storylines addressing homosexuality in the 1998-1999 season. The *Dawson's Creek* storyline, which focused on a principal character, Jack, coming out, generated a protest by an antigay group, Stop Promoting Homosexuality International, which did not interfere with females (Troiden, 1989); the assumption was that gay youth waited to come out until college or young adult working life, when they had gained some independence.

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5 Epstein (1999) acknowledged, though, that the number of gay characters – adult and youth – who appear as regular characters on sitcoms and drama series was an extremely small percentage of the more than 600 regular characters who appear in prime-time series on network television. But, he opined, “That is, of course, seven more gay characters than were on television just ten years ago” (Epstein, 1999, para 10).
production (Epstein, 1999). Although antigay advocacy groups also took aim at an episode that occurred at the end of the 2001 season, where Jack kissed his boyfriend on the night of his school’s prom, it seemed that audiences were, to some extent, more accepting of scenes showing gay youth intimacy. Such scenes are fairly common on The Real World. And, youth viewers have reported that their attitudes toward homosexuality had changed after watching the program and becoming accustomed to seeing the travails of gay youth (Epstein, 2001).

The reaction to the Dawson’s Creek kiss seemed more muted than that which was received by a 1993 episode of the family drama Picket Fences. In the episode, two teen girls, both of whom are straight, share a playful, experimental kiss. The episode generated sufficient controversy to compel the program’s network ABC to demand that the scene be reshot in the dark (Tropiano, 2002).

These late 1990s renderings of gay youth emerged at a moment when there were two prevailing frames for gay youth. On the one hand, there was the trope, echoed in media accounts, academic journals, and public policy texts, of gay youth being “at risk” – for example, the “lonely gay teen” (Egan, 2000, p. 110) who struggled with a host of problems due to the stigmatization of youth homosexuality. The murder of Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard in October 1998 focused attention on the problem of gay youth as well as hate crimes, in general, in part because the facts of the case could be made to fit this

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6 The March 1999 protest against Dawson’s Creek occurred a month after Jerry Falwell was widely ridiculed for suggesting in a newsletter targeted to members of his family association that Tinky Winky, a character on the popular preschool program Teletubbies, might be gay (as cited in Mifflin, 1999, p. 11). That February a right-wing group called the Christian Action Network also lobbied unsuccessfully for a “Homosexual Content” rating to be adopted by TV programmers (Epstein, 1999).

7 This understanding of The Real World’s power in cultivating more tolerant attitudes toward gay youth is illustrated by the following comment by a youth marketer. Explaining polling that indicated more acceptance toward homosexuality among young people, he said "Look at The Real World. There's always a gay teen on there" (as cited in Paul, 2001, p. 48).
stereotype. The other trope of gay youth was more positive: that of young people coming out of the closet (at ever earlier ages), becoming more visible (in Gay-Straight Alliances, for example) and sometimes empowered and finding love (Ireland, 2000; Steiner, 2001).

TV makers in the late 1990s believed that television could address the social issue of youth homosexuality in a pro-social way and at the same time benefit itself, appealing to its audience by making its stories more compelling. The following quotes illustrate this view:

[Having Jack come out] seemed like it might be a really interesting development in terms of what we can do with Jack and how it can open up new story possibilities. Not only on how it impacted upon him but also how all of the other characters on the Creek deal with it. -- *Dawson's Creek* Executive Producer Paul Stupin (as cited in Epstein, 1999, para 12)

Everyone's trying to tell stories that aren't out there. In a way what's good about stuff like this is that the more these stories are out there and the more homosexuality is portrayed in episodic television, the more it becomes a nonissue. – *Felicity* Executive Producer J. J. Abrams (as cited in Epstein, 1999, para 21)

I think our feeling is, the more you can present alternative lifestyles as normal and acceptable by characters, the more you break down those barriers…Because it's a dramatic event in a person's life, it's a dramatic event to present. You want to tell

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8 One of the subsequent storylines, for example, focused on Jack's former girlfriend, Joey, trying to set him up on a date with a male college student.
stories that are relevant to people and their experience. – *Party of Five* producer P. K. Simonds (as cited in Epstein, 1999, para 22).⁹

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand, evaluate, and critically interrogate TV programming from the early 2000s that was positioned as targeted to, or helping address, the specific issues faced by gay youth and their families. I scrutinize three texts: a made-for-TV movie, *The Truth About Jane*, that first premiered on the cable channel Lifetime in 2000 (Chapter 2); a storyline involving Bianca Montgomery on the ABC soap opera, *All My Children*, from 2002–2005 (Chapter 3); and the Chicago (2002) season of *The Real World* (Chapter 4).

Each chapter examines the interrelationship between television writers, directors, and producers and media advocacy groups in shaping the representation of youth homosexuality. The chapters progress from emphasizing writers, directors, and producers (Chapter 2) to emphasizing advocacy groups (Chapter 4). They also progress in their focus on different moments in the production-distribution cycle. Chapter 2 examines a veteran TV movie writer-director, Lee Rose—known for making social issues telefilms—and her drive to make a TV movie dealing with the problems facing gay youth and their families. During the screenwriting process, Rose solicited input from GLAAD and Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Although this is a familiar duty for GLAAD, consulting on a media product was a first for PFLAG.

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⁹ The storyline to which Simonds referred was part of a three-episode story arc in which regular character Julia Salinger becomes attracted to a female college professor, causing her to consider her sexual orientation. Julia’s overture was a brief bit of sexual confusion, which was resolved after a few episodes.
In its focus on a three-year period after the coming out arc of Bianca Montgomery and the question of whether *All My Children* would commit to “fully realizing” a lesbian main character, Chapter 3 analyses the interplay and sometime struggle between two groups. On one side were writers and producers of the program and ABC network executives. On the other side were two online groups that tried to influence the evolution of the storyline: a lesbian fan group (BAM Fans) and a lesbian media criticism and advocacy website (AfterEllen.com).

In Chapter 4, the object of analysis shifts to the efforts of a media advocacy group to redress the stigma of youth homosexuality on television. Here, my focus is on an initiative by GLAAD, a report it sponsored and published in 2003 called, *How Youth Media Can Help Combat Homophobia Among American Teenagers* (Streitmatter, 2003). The goal of the report was to study and evaluate youth-targeted magazines and television programs, and, specifically, to understand how the attitudes of young people were affected by the portrayals of gay youth in mass media. *The Real World Chicago* was one of three programs included in the GLAAD study.

Each chapter, then, focuses on an effort in the early 2000s by television makers (writers, producers, and network executives) and by advocacy and fan groups to work within television’s genre codes and socioeconomic infrastructure to provide better images of gay youth and their families. The focus in each chapter is on investigating how the implicit goal of both groups often is constrained by genre codes, ideology, and other factors, including perceptions of what the audience, networks, and sponsors are “ready for.” This relationship between TV insiders and outsiders is often fraught, reflecting the different investments of both sides. For example, the desire of BAM Fans and AfterEllen to see a more satisfying type of lesbian representation on *All My Children* (Chapter 3) was continually challenged by
ABC’s desire to insert Bianca in different types of stories not involving intimacy and sexuality.

I also interrogate each group’s assumptions about television and visibility and how these are manifest in the texts being studied. In the concluding chapter, I use each text to open up a broader discussion of issues in gay rights, liberal tolerance, and visibility politics. For example, Chapter 2’s discussion of a TV writer-director using social psychological models to portray the healthy development of gay youth and their parents is used to discuss the broader issues of the discourse of parental anxieties about gay youth and of the work of social institutions such as psychology and television in allaying these concerns.

Method

I began this project in late 2002 and early 2003 by selecting texts (the TV movie, soap opera storyline, and reality series, mentioned above, as well as a few dramatic series: Once and Again, Dark Angel, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer) that had something in common. Not only did they represent U.S. TV’s “new” rendering of more positive, sometimes “out and proud” gay youth, but they also contained depictions of lesbian youth, which had been even rarer than that of gay male youth on television (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Tropiano, 2002).

During the course of writing this dissertation I have moved from wanting to use feminist theories to broadly assess the representation of lesbian youth in television programming to wanting to understand these texts as part of the discourse about gay youth at a particular historical moment that confronted U.S. television with a sense of urgency. In the years since this project started, a vociferous political climate has emerged in which LGBT visibility and rights claims have been met with what appears to be a resounding backlash. It has become clearer to me in the interim that these texts share a deeper connection in the work they do. It has also become clear that these texts can be used to
engage with issues in cultural politics, from anxieties about gay youth to the “kinship dilemma” (Butler, 2002, p. 16) faced by some gay and lesbian people as they seek recognition and legitimacy by the state in the sphere of kinship (e.g., marriage and adoption rights).

This shift in emphasis, and rethinking of how the texts are connected, is also due, no doubt, to my own experiences during this period. These range from political experiences (rethinking my investment in liberal tolerance as a political strategy during and after the 2004 U.S. general election) to academic ones (clarifying my relationship to the discipline of mass communication). The process of writing this dissertation has been a continual, iterative one, then, of thinking about the texts in relation to television and U.S. cultural politics, reassessing my own disciplinary footing and identity, and, of course, learning more in many different areas (e.g. media studies, feminist and queer theories, and cultural studies). This process led me to narrow the number of texts I had initially wanted to study from six to three. I thought these three texts were most pertinent and revealing of the problem being studied, and I thought that fewer data sources would allow for a richer analysis.

My approach is that of the case study: an “in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources…The case study is usually seen as an instance of a broader phenomenon, as part of a larger set of parallel instances” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 2). This narrowing of focus initially resulted in the selection of three texts for analysis: The Truth About Jane, the “post-coming out” Bianca storyline on All My Children, and the Chicago season of The Real World. After much study, and when the broad outlines of the project became clearer, I decided to shift the focus of Chapter 4 from emphasizing The Real World to emphasizing the GLAAD report described previously. This report included the Chicago season of the series as part of its sample. Shifting my focus to
the GLAAD report allowed me to make a more thorough argument about the overlapping
efforts of the TV industry and advocacy groups to challenge the representation of gay youth.

I draw from critical-cultural studies in its focus on the political and epistemological
relations undergirding discursive forms and its attention to context. I also draw from
feminist poststructural work, especially Butler’s (1990, 1993, 2000) understanding of
identities and practices, such as kinship, as discursive and performative. Performativity refers to
Butler’s complex theory about subjectivity, power, and agency. Butler (1990) argues that
gender is an iterative process that occurs through citation. A subject neither wills nor intends
it, and it does not occur through a single act. It is a sequence of acts that produces the
appearance of a stable, gendered and sexed body. ¹⁰ This reiteration of gender norms is
needed for bodies to become sexed.

Implicit in Butler’s understanding of construction is the acknowledgement that
certain sexed identifications are enabled while others are foreclosed or disavowed in the
symbolic order. She argues that “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative
fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the
body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the
heterosexual imperative ” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). The materialization of sexed bodies is never
complete; reiteration simultaneously produces and destabilizes sex. In these spaces, the
repetition of gender norms might be put into a "potentially productive crisis" (Butler, 1993,
p. 10). According to Butler’s theory, people can engage in subversive reiteration and citation

¹⁰ Butler (1993) wanted to move past an impasse brought by viewing sex/gender
either in constructionist or essentialist terms. This thinking (1) posits sex as strictly pre-
discursive (originary, a “given”) and gender as discursive (additive) and/or (2) attributes the
formation of gender to an either/or dichotomy, as occurring without human agency or being
entirely determined by a subject. Both cases -- viewing gender as deciding the subject or the
subject deciding gender -- are problematic, Butler argued, for they assert either that the
subject is devoid of agency or that gender is entirely an effect of choice.
"make gender trouble") to further destabilize and challenge the fixity of these categories, to expose how the sexed subject -- the heterosexual -- forms itself.

Butler (2000) focused, more specifically than she had in previous work (1993), on normative kinship as a site for the consolidation of oppressive gender and sexual norms. Intervening in the debate over gay kinship, Butler (2000) challenged structuralist understandings of kinship, which normalize stagnant gender roles and the elision of “sexual others” from representation, through a rethinking of kinship as performative and, thus, open to cultural change. Butler (2002, p. 28) also considered the ways in which the desire for marriage and other kinship rights by same-sex couples—seeking legitimation by the state -- is “double edged.” (See Chapter 5 for more discussion.)

Although I am not performing a critical discourse analysis, I share many of the assumptions of that method, as summarized by Barker and Galasiński (2001, pp. 62-69): texts are intertextual and multifunctional; discourse is socially constructed and ideological; and the uncovering of contradictions and dilemmas between language and social reality is valuable. Also, although I view my interpretations as being “open, dynamic, and subject to change,” I believe that closely “anchoring” the analysis to the discursive form being studied will make my findings less arbitrary (Barker & Galasiński, 2001, p. 64). Being reflexive also furthers that goal. I also focus attention on form and content as equally important objects of analysis. In Chapter 2, for example, I highlight the two-part narrative structure of The Truth About Jane. This grounds a broader analysis, in Chapter 5, of the ideological functioning of the telefilm’s linear framing strategy.

In the pages that follow I introduce each of the texts to be examined. My focus is on situating the emergence of each text within both a broad sociopolitical context calling for positive images of gay male and lesbian youth and a specific and historical pattern of
representation of youth homosexuality on U.S. television (i.e., in terms of genres, in the case of Chapters 2 and 3). I also discuss the strategies used by TV insiders and outsiders to achieve their goals. Each section also provides an overview of the specific issues addressed in successive chapters.

**Background for each chapter**

“One mother’s love”: A Lifetime telefilm focuses on parental responses to youth homosexuality

The hardest thing for a parent is watching their child come of age

The hardest thing for Jane was lying to her parents

But, Jane has a secret that she’s kept to herself

And, when that secret is known, it could cost her the love of her family

A family’s struggle to accept their daughter for who she is

(Voiceover, Promo, *The Truth About Jane*)

Premiering in August 2000, in the recent aftermath of Matthew Shepard’s murder, the Lifetime telefilm *The Truth About Jane* is focused on addressing the isolation gay and questioning youth feel, as well as the problems faced by their families after realizing that a child is gay.\(^{11}\) Research indicates that only a small percentage of gay and lesbian youth –11% in one study (Savin-Williams, 1998) – felt supported by their parents when they came out to

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\(^{11}\) In the past decade and a half, an array of affirmative texts and practices, ranging from books to advice columns, radio call-in programs, TV talk shows, and support groups have arisen to guide, counsel, and support straight parents in helping their gay children and themselves adapt to the disclosure of youth homosexuality. Several book titles illustrate this focus: *My Child Is Gay: How Parents React When They Hear the News* (McDougall, 1998), *Straight Parents, Gay Children: Inspiring Families to Live Honestly and with Greater Understanding* (Bernstein, 1995), *Mom, Dad, I’m Gay: How Families Negotiate Coming Out* (Savin-Williams, 2001), and *Something to Tell You: The Road Families Travel When a Child is Gay* (Herdt & Koff, 2000).
them. Most reported facing varying levels of parental rejection, threats, or abuse (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; Telljohann & Price, 1993), leaving them more vulnerable to homelessness and other related risks, such as depression, assault, prostitution, substance abuse, low-self-esteem, suicide, delinquency, and STDs (see Blake et al., 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Orenstein, 2001; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994; Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001; Russell & Joyner, 2001).

A fictionalized story of a 15-year old girl’s coming out as a lesbian and the effects this has on her family, especially her mother, the telefilm was praised by Psychology Today for its realistic depiction of the coming-out process (Eisenberg, 2000).12 Describing the film’s positive impact, writer-director Lee Rose said, “We got thousands of E-mails from kids, from parents—the kids saying, ‘After the movie, I came out to my parents’; parents saying, ‘We had disowned our children, now we are going to join PFLAG’” (as cited in Kaye, 2001, para 14). Rose is considered “one of the sharpest creators of provocative, topical, socially responsible telefilms today”; The Truth About Jane was her first foray into directing (Littlefield, 2000, para 7). The film also was nominated for both a Writer’s Guild of America Award and a GLAAD Fairness Award.

The Truth About Jane is significant for addressing teen lesbianism. Most previous telefilms dealing with youth homosexuality had constructed it as something confined to white, middle-to-upper-class, male teenagers.13 The telefilm is also significant for centering

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12 Although some reviewers (e.g., Variety and People) found The Truth About Jane to be heavy-handed and/or simplistic, most praised the telefilm as earnest and helpful.

13 Although a handful of 1990s TV movies addressed issues facing adult lesbians (i.e., Serving in Silence: The Marguerite Cammermeier Story, Two Mothers for Zachary, and What Makes a Family), teen lesbianism had been mostly ignored. The two early full-length telefilms that portrayed youth lesbianism -- Born Innocent (1974) and Cage Without a Key (1975) -- framed it
on a mother-daughter relationship. Although mothers have played important roles in previous telefilms about youth homosexuality -- for example, working to resolve the tension between their husbands and sons in films such as *Consenting Adult*, *Welcome Home, Bobby*, *The Truth About Alex*, and *Doing Time on Maple Drive* -- they have typically not been foregrounded (Rapping, 1992; Tropiano, 2002). (See Figure 1.)

*The Truth About Jane* is also a departure in that it attempts to move away from the tropes of situationality and pathos commonly associated with representations of youth homosexuality in the TV movie. In contrast to depictions of heterosexual youth, gay youth are depicted as going through a phase, their sexuality situational. Sexuality is all about genital activity, not about love. Also, unlike straight youth, it never just is, it has to be attributed to something negative — for example, violence, imprisonment, madness, military service, poverty, or a dysfunctional family environment (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). “Positive” portrayals have rendered gay youth asexual but still wholly defined by their sexuality. The inclusion of youth homosexuality only when it serves a specific narrative purpose is another reflection of its being highlighted and marked as different from the norm. As Kielwasser and Wolf observe: “In these films, in fact, the problematic of homosexuality is transformed into the problematic of the ‘American Family.’ The impact of the gay character upon the traditional family structure provides the bulk of the drama; homosexuality per se is hardly examined and certainly not empowered” (p. 362).

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Figure 1. The visual composition of its video jacket furthers a reading of *The Truth About Jane* as a mother-daughter story, with Jane assuming the role of the uncertain teen and Janice, the protective mother.

In contrast to these telefilms, Jane’s lesbianism in *The Truth About Jane* is treated as a core part of “who she really is” and not attributed to something bad having happened to her. She is from a stable family that, while it might be troubled, loves her. Also, she is shown as having a sexual life, one that does not destroy her. The film reflects most current social-
psychological conceptions of youth homosexuality as stable and coherent (Beaty, 1999).\footnote{In light of research indicating that the developmental process is more challenging for nonheterosexual youth because of sociocultural factors (Fontaine & Hammond, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Zera, 1992), normative models of adolescent sexual identity formation emerged (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) that reworked Erikson’s (1968) popular model. Erikson’s model was viewed by many as reinforcing heterosexist gender and sexual norms (see Archer, 1992, and Josselson, 1988).} And, Jane’s process of resolving her identity crisis – moving from comparing herself to others and being conflicted about her sexual identity to accepting herself as a lesbian -- follows the trajectory identified by Cass (1979) as normative for individuals forming a gay or lesbian identity. The progression of Jane’s family after her disclosure -- from disintegration to ambivalence to integration -- is also congruent with contemporary social-psychological theory (Herdt & Koff, 2000). Janice’s path to acceptance can further be mapped along the five stages that Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) identify as normative for parents coming to terms with learning that their children are gay or lesbian: shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance.

Jane’s coming out can be read as mobilizing a transformation in Janice’s life, in that it leads to an identity crisis where she must reconsider her personal identity as a wife and mother. So, there are two coming of age stories: the conventional (expected) one of Jane coming to terms with being a lesbian and the less conventional one of Janice learning to accept the realization that her daughter is nonheterosexual.

But, the focal point seems to be on Janice’s story. “It is in a way her mother’s journey; she's the one who goes through the biggest changes,” Rose said (Littlefield, 2000, para 8).

This makes sense, given the film’s run on the Lifetime network, whose core audience is viewed as “wives and mothers” (Byars & Meehan, 1995; Rasmusson, 2001). The narrative focus in Lifetime programming and in TV movies, especially, is on an empowered heroine...
coming to find herself and save her family (Hundley, 2002). In addition, Lifetime programming is distinctive for blending public and personal – for addressing social issues through an emphasis on the personal, emotional, and familial concerns of characters. The 1997 Lifetime Original *Any Mother’s Son*, for example, focused on the 1992 murder of naval enlisted personnel Allen Schindler. Covered up by the military initially but subsequently revealed to be a “gay bashing,” Schindler’s death had become immersed in the “gays in the military” debate as it coincided with Congressional debates on the topic. That telefilm centered on the battle waged by Schindler’s mother to expose the cover-up of her son’s death and to hold those responsible accountable.

The decision to focus her telefilm on Janice’s growth reflects Rose’s investments in reaching parents (especially, mothers) and treating them sympathetically. She wanted her audience to identify with Janice, whom the actor playing her, Stockard Channing, described as a “nice, admirable, liberal woman who behaves out of fear and protective instincts toward her child” (as cited in Mills, 2000, p. 12). Rose’s decision to produce the film with Lifetime also makes sense. At the time, Lifetime was cable’s number-one-rated prime-time channel,

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15 In presenting issues considered of concern to women that are often glossed over in other media representations, featuring female protagonists in central roles, and often centering on female relationships, TV movies have come to be emblematic of Lifetime programming and are key to its success (Byars & Meehan, 1995).

16 As Rapping (1992) noted, the made-for-TV movie format most often addresses resonant social issues and problems (e.g., juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, environmental pollution, and substance use) as they affect a “typical” American family (thereby constructing its audience member as a member of ‘the American family’). Lifetime films are known for addressing a wide range of topics that “feel real” to its core audience of wives and mothers (Carole Black, as cited in Brady, 2001, para 6). These topics include domestic violence, rape, adultery, sexual harassment, women’s rights, gender equity in sports, prostitution, child care, breast cancer, child care, self-esteem, adoption, eating disorders, teen suicide, abortion, homelessness, racism, gun control, multiple sclerosis, and gay rights (“Our Lifetime Commitment,” n.d.).
with high viewership among women, premium advertising, and near universal cable penetration (Larson, 2001).

In the chapter, I consider the politics of Rose’s strategic decision to situate the depiction of a woman grieving the loss of the daughter she thought she had within the larger story of a woman grieving her own loss of self. I draw from Fields’s (2001) study of the work undertaken by parents participating in a PFLAG-like group. In many ways, *The Truth About Jane* can be read as a “PFLAG-movie.” As previously mentioned, Rose consulted the group during the scriptwriting process. In addition, she shows Janice attending PFLAG meetings and a rally.

Using the question, “How can the acceptance of homosexuality perpetuate the oppression of people who identify as gay or lesbian?” (p. 165), as a starting point, Fields argues that an underlying, unstated rationale motivated many parents in their seeking out supportive settings to work on accepting the newfound knowledge of their children’s homosexuality. It was to restore what the parents felt was an identity that had been “discredited” by their children being gay. All of the parents in Fields’s study strove to accept their children as gay or lesbian, and the focal point of the participation in the group was growth in this regard, from initially being disappointed with having a gay or lesbian child to speaking publicly about it to others, in effect, being a “straight ally.”

But, as Fields (2001) argues, many parents deeply held the view that they had caused their children’s homosexuality and that it was undesirable. Their “identity work” in the group involved “restoring” as normal their identities as parents and that of their children, by conforming to heteronormative conceptions of healthy parenting and gender and sexual norms. Thus, an effort to challenge stigma only perpetuates it because its very practice is rooted in stigmatized conceptions of “normal” (i.e., heterosexual) gender and sexual identity.
In the chapter, I discuss how the rendering of Janice’s “journey” concurs with the work that all Lifetime heroines must do. I also argue that it works at another level: as the sort of “identity work” that Fields (2001) has discussed. The chapter considers whether *The Truth About Jane* can avoid reproducing the stigmatized depiction of youth homosexuality as something undesirable and threatening to the family.

Being Erica Kane’s daughter: An analysis of *All My Children’s* early 2000s lesbian storyline

There are kids who commit suicide rather than tell their parents. [T]he opportunity to be part of a storyline like this one, that was done with so much dignity and humanity that would maybe help some kids understand that their parents would love them and that nobody should have to commit suicide because they’re afraid that they can’t be who they are [was so important to me]. -- Susan Lucci, who plays Erica Kane on *All My Children*, on *CNN Live This Morning* (Harris & Stouffer, 2001)

The summer months of 2000 were abuzz with news that Bianca Montgomery – the teenage daughter of Erica Kane – would be returning to *All My Children*. Bianca had been away from Pine Valley, the fictional community in which the ABC daytime soap opera is set, for the two years that she lived with her father out-of-state while dealing with an eating disorder. Played by a new actor, the character appeared that July -- with a “secret” that seemed to agitate her for the first several months she was back. In early November viewers learned that Bianca was a lesbian, and, in late December, her mother Erica finally learned. Erica found out the night she had planned a publicity event for her cosmetics company Enchantment. The event was intended to function as a different sort of coming out for Bianca into a highly visible position in the company. Dressed like her mother in the show,
with similar hair color and features, Bianca is marked as Erica’s heir and potential successor. Then, Erica finds Bianca embracing Sarah, a young woman whom Bianca met while in rehab. Bianca and Sarah have just declared their love for one another. In the climactic scene, Bianca symbolically removes her dress and lets her hair down. She then tells her mother that she is not the daughter she thought she had. (See Figure 2.)

![Figure 2. Erica, in the background in the first picture, walks in as Sarah embraces Bianca. In the third picture, Bianca emotionally confronts her mother.](image)

The storyline emerged in the same context and the same time as that of *The Truth About Jane*. Fewer than two years had passed since the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, and attention was focused on the plight of gay youth and their families. It is not surprising, then, that the Bianca coming out story bears many similarities to the two-part narrative used in *The Truth About Jane*, in particular its simultaneous focus on Bianca’s trying to accept her own sexuality and come out from under
her mother’s shadow and on Erica’s difficulties reconnecting with her daughter and also accepting that her daughter would not be her mirror image. It is worth noting that the All My Children staff, like Rose during the development of The Truth About Jane, contacted GLAAD for input about how to best render Bianca’s coming out storyline.

Agnes Nixon, who created All My Children and other soaps and is known for focusing on social issues in her soaps, was inspired in part from reading Chastity Bono’s memoir, Family Outing, and its account of how Bono’s famous mother Cher, for all her worldliness, struggled to accept her daughter’s lesbianism. Nixon used this narrative strategy -- introducing a gay youth storyline by focusing on a mother-daughter relationship -- for reasons that echo those of Rose. Nixon believed that she could reach audience members who similarly identify with Erica as a mother. This makes sense in a genre form like soap opera that is constructed as feminine and that also gives such a powerful role to the mother (Modleski, 1982).

Storylines in January and February 2001 continued to stress Erica’s difficulty accepting her daughter’s sexuality. They also focused on Bianca’s relationship with Sarah, who is facing a recurrence of her eating disorder and is rejected by her mother (Harrington, 2003b). Spring and early summer 2001 storylines had Bianca developing a crush on a straight friend Laura – only to subsequently learn that Laura has developed a deadly heart condition. Laura subsequently weds a man in the hospital. A scene between Erica and Laura’s mother Brooke conveyed their mutual sense of loss. It also allowed Erica to show her emerging acceptance and maternal love (Harrington, 2003b). By summer 2001, the Bianca coming out storyline had become, like The Truth About Jane, “a gay teen’s struggle to embrace her sexuality and live life to the fullest, and a parent’s difficult struggle to accept her daughter’s sexuality” (Harrington, 2003a, p. 225).
Another connection between *The Truth About Jane* and the Bianca coming out story has to do with their both being efforts to redress a history of stigmatized portrayals of homosexuality in their respective genres. Before Bianca, U. S. soap operas had had only four gay characters among thousands of heterosexual ones. The near absence of out gay characters and content in the genre is particularly compelling at a time when gay characters had become “familiar visitors and even regular characters” (Gross, 2001, p. 257) on U.S. television by the end of the 1990s.

As Modleski (1990, p. 93) notes, although soap opera narratives can engage with controversial social issues such as abortion, premarital and extramarital sex, divorce, alcoholism, and abuse, “an issue like homosexuality, which could explode the family structure rather than temporarily disrupt it, is simply ignored.” Heterosexuality is the “ideological problematic” structuring daytime soap operas. And, while it is continually troubled and unfulfilled, heterosexual romantic love remains the primary goal of soap narratives. Also, whereas heterosexual characters in problem-oriented social issue storylines (such as prostitution and infidelity) could be recuperated into normative heterosexuality over time, homosexual characters would always be “marked by their problem.”

A case in point is the treatment of AIDS, which was ignored for several years – Nixon did not believe the audience was ready to confront it – and then dealt with in stories that focused only on the plight of “innocent” heterosexual women who contracted the disease from their male partners (Anger, 1999; see also Calhoun-French, 1990). Butler (1990) attributes this reticence to depict homosexuality to a “bourgeois family ideology” that excludes minorities and preserves a coherent white, middle to upper class, worldview. Heterosexual black characters have been included in soap operas since the 1960s but have
mostly been assigned to a “parallel universe,” out of a “fear of miscegenation” (Butler, 1990, pp. 155-156). There is even greater reluctance, he said, to include nonheterosexual characters:

The reason for this is obvious, gay men and lesbians represent the ultimate threat to the middle-class family. They are, in a sense, afamilial; they exist outside of the parameters of courtship and its culmination in monogamy and family. Consequently, there is no point of entry for them into the middle-class family and no framework upon which to build a parallel familial structure. (Butler, 1990, p. 156)

But, soap operas also struggle with being relevant. In the early 1990s, a confluence of factors led *One Life to Live* and *All My Children* to first start introducing storylines explicitly addressing homosexuality, in particular, youth homosexuality.\(^\text{17}\) These factors included gay

\(^{17}\) In 1992, *One Life to Live* ran two overlapping storylines. The first involved, in the context of the AIDS quilt coming to Llanview, the soap’s fictional community, a recurring character, Rev. Andrew Carpenter, confronting his military father about his father’s homophobic reaction to the death from AIDS of the Reverend’s brother. The second storyline involved a closeted gay teen, Billy Douglas, turning to the Reverend for support and then being outed to his parents by a “malicious woman,” who also lies to them, telling them that Rev. Carpenter, to whom the teenager had turned for advice, had molested their son (see Fuqua, 1995). The narrative focus turns on the social costs of intolerance, as Billy stands up for Rev. Carpenter and, in the process, comes out to his family and is subsequently thrown out of his home.

Three years later, in 1995, *All My Children* drew from real events in its longer-running storyline involving a new character, high school teacher Michael Delaney, who comes out to his class during a lesson on the Holocaust and then is embattled in a controversy over his fitness to teach. Suspended, he also faces accusations that he has “corrupted” a closeted high school student, Kevin Sheffield, who has enlisted his support. In a number of ways, this storyline seemed to be an improvement over the Billy Douglas one. Although the character’s coming out storyline moved to the back burner after a few months, Delaney continued to appear on the program until 1998. Also, he was linked to one of the show’s core families through the marriage of his sister Laurel Dillon, and he was a friend to several other main characters (Mumford, 1997).
youth becoming more visible across popular culture, including television, and the renewed interest among soap operas, due to declining ratings, in social issues storylines (e.g., breast cancer, gang rape, organ donation, and mental illness) to draw viewers (Martin, 2003).

*One Life to Live’s* storyline involving gay teen Billy Douglas received substantial media coverage and was lauded for its sympathetic treatment of youth homosexuality and powerful acting (Gross, 2001). Yet, whereas Rev. Carpenter, a recurring character who was shown subsequently patching things up with his father, Billy received no closure; the character, according to Fuqua (1995) just “faded away.”

*All My Children’s* storyline, which began in 1998, seemed to be an improvement. It was not revealed for several months that schoolteacher Michael Delaney was gay, which, presumably, allowed viewers to form a favorable reaction to him. The character was also shown interacting with other gay characters, and references were made to his having a romantic life (Mumford, 1997). Mumford (1997) contends, however, that this tolerant representation was conflicted by oversimplification. Both Delaney and the teen, Kevin Sheffield, he befriended conformed to the norm of heterosexual masculinity, and were universally popular, even angelic – tactical choices on the part of producers to make homosexuality, Mumford argues, nontthreatening. These choices, though, reinforced a homogenous view of gay characters. The characters were further rendered as less multidimensional than their heterosexual counterparts by the refusal of producers to show either character in a sexual encounter, even while opposite-sex sexual scenarios predominated. Lastly, producers denied the complicated and ongoing fact of heterosexism as a social problem by portraying only peripheral characters as homophobic (Mumford, 1997).

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18 The Billy Douglas character appeared one more time, on June 21, 1993, in a special episode dealing with AIDS. That day, all three major networks coordinated their soap opera programming to incorporate AIDS storylines (Fuqua, 1995).
Both soap operas took on a social issue deemed controversial and subsequently received credit for redressing a problem in the genre. But, as this discussion illustrates, both programs also maintained homosexuality as something stigmatized by taking steps to contain the threat it imposed.

“But, I’m Erica Kane’s daughter.”

In this context we can see why the decision to make Bianca a lesbian was heralded as so much a departure. Bianca is a long-running character and is, thus, known to viewers; she was not introduced as a lesbian. And, she has a romantic life, which is alluded to even though she continually feels unsuccessful in love. Furthermore, Bianca’s sexuality is rendered a core part of her identity, and not as a choice (Harrington, 2003b). Bianca, thus, exceeds the “conditions of represent-ability,” which limited the depiction of homosexuality in daytime soap operas to non-core, short-term characters, engaged mostly in problem-based storylines, and with little to no on-screen intimacy and desire rendered (Harrington, 2003b, p. 216).

“Core” refers to membership in one of the one or two main families at the center of a soap opera’s fictional community. This status is important to soap opera viability, as Allen (1985) has noted, because of how soaps emphasize character relationships. The storyline “represent[s] a climate shift from the baby steps of the past,” said Mara Levinsky of Soap Opera Digest, “and a difference in the networks' sense of what viewers are ready for" (as cited in Rosen, 2003, p. E28).

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19 In a November 2000 episode Bianca explains to her friend Leo that she cannot come out because her mother and everyone around her expects her to be heterosexual.

20 Bianca’s lesbianism is also significant in that industry observers thought that soap operas, if they were to address homosexuality again, would be less likely to focus on lesbianism (Pela, 1998). They presumed that a heterosexual female audience would not be inclined to see issues related to lesbianism.
The primary reason, though, that the storyline was considered such a breakthrough is that producers decided to have the daughter of Erica Kane, the most familiar soap character in popular culture, come out. Scott Seomin, the Entertainment Media Director of GLAAD, explained Bianca’s significance:

What’s important here is that this is Erica Kane’s daughter. Historically, gay and lesbian characters have been minor ones. They are not part of the family cluster. But this isn’t some new lesbian character who pops into Pine Valley, stays awhile, has no romantic life at all and then leaves. Erica Kane, the most popular character on daytime today, will always have a daughter. (“Daytime Gets,” 2001, p. 8)

As Fuqua (1995) noted, efforts by writers of One Life to Live to have their 1992 gay storyline revolve around Joey Buchanan, scion of the Buchanan clan, coming out were rebuffed by the network as too controversial. The show’s head writer, Michael Malone, told TV Guide, “It’s one thing to explore homophobia. It’s quite another to explore the life of a gay couple – a life that includes sex and such problems as whether or not to adopt children. I doubt that day will come” (as cited in Fuqua, 1995, p. 28). Commenting on the Bianca storyline, Nixon said she had learned from her previous efforts that "if you want to do a story about a social issue seriously, the character has to be really well integrated," (Behrens, 2000, para 5).

Harrington (2003a) analyzed the production context undergirding the Bianca coming out arc and discussed the many factors that simultaneously constrained and enabled the

21 In 1983, Nixon introduced the first gay or lesbian character in U.S. soap opera history with a storyline involving child psychologist Lynn Carson on All My Children. The storyline lasted only two months. According to Harrington (2001), the purpose of Carson was to help a young primary character Devon McFadden confirm her heterosexuality.
storyline. Drawing from interviews with industry observers including the press as well as production staff and actors, Harrington noted that, in a context of declining ratings, social issues storylines were being used less and less in the five years preceding the Bianca storyline. At the same time, however, the high-profile storyline was considered a way to create buzz. This proved successful, according to TV critic Michael Logan, who ranked the Bianca storyline as second only to the 1981 wedding of Luke and Laura in generating general interest in daytime soap opera (Harrington, 2003a).

The need to be relevant definitely was a factor motivating the Bianca storyline. After the gradual writing out of Michael Delaney, no out gay characters existed in all of daytime soap operas, something that seemed anachronistic and at odds with a media culture that otherwise was hailing the burgeoning visibility of gay men and lesbian women on television. Two of the most significant reasons for the storyline were that it provided a searing storyline for Lucci and it worked in a broader narrative context to allow her character more complexity. Having her daughter come out was not only compelling, but it was ironic, given how Erica has been so associated with heterosexuality.† Furthermore, having the character struggle to accept her daughter’s sexuality furthered an objective long pursued by writers:

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Harrington’s (2001) interviews, conducted with industry insiders, elicited the following observations accounting for one reason why the Bianca coming out storyline was attractive to the program’s makers:

For [Erica], someone who’s been married so many times, had so many lovers, a woman who truly, truly loves men, to have her daughter be a lesbian [is] loaded with irony and … sets up these very rich contrasts between the characters” -- Matt Webb Mitovich, Soaps In Depth-ABC, personal interview (cited in Harrington, 2001, p. 22)

“Of all the characters on the canvas, [Erica] was the best one to explore this with of any show on daytime … because she is such a girly-girl, because she is so man-crazy, because she is so image-conscious… This had the most explosive, outrageous, and entertaining possibilities … of any other character that it might happen to” -- Michael Logan, TV Guide, personal interview (cited in Harrington, 2001, p. 22)
make Erica -- who had been, for so many years, a character that audiences “loved to hate” --
to someone more vulnerable and sympathetic. The coming out storyline, thus, made sense
with the previous characterization of Bianca and Erica as having a conflicted relationship
and Erica always feeling like a “bad mother.” Harrington (2001, p. 21) surmises,

Bianca’s story is not, at its core, a story about homophobia or the coming-out
process or lesbian intimacy, per se, though each of these elements is part of the
narrative fabric. Rather, it first unfolded as a story about how to incorporate Bianca
into Erica’s life – which can be read, I would argue, as a fictional representation of
the question of how to incorporate homosexuality into soap operas.

When Harrington (2003b) concluded her study of the coming out arc (in early fall
2001), she noted that Bianca’s sexuality was no longer a “front burner” issue. The character
still figured in storylines, but more in the capacity of the “good friend.” Drawing from the
work of Allen (1985), who noted that romantic relationships, and not just kinship and social
ones, are mandatory if a soap opera character is to be viable, Harrington was unsure whether
Bianca could be realized in the same way as her heterosexual counterparts. Harrington
argued that the character’s future viability depended on the soap’s writers addressing her
romantic life.23

23 Harrington (2003a) noted that Bianca, when reintroduced in 2000, was changed in
age from 12 to 16, this so the network would not have to address issues, such as
homosexuality in early adolescence, which they deemed controversial. At the same time,
though, in changing her age to 16 – and not 18 or 20 – producers also avoided having to
immediately deal with another issue they deemed controversial: the depiction of lesbian
intimacy. (The program could also avoid having to deal with other thorny political issues like
healthcare and relational rights.) Whereas teenage Bianca has romantic feelings, All My
Children can avoid involving the character in a serious romance, instead casting her yearnings
In focusing on a three-year period after the coming out arc, Chapter 3 addresses the question that Harrington (2003b) posed. It also deepens our discussion of the role “outsiders” play in mediating the representation of youth homosexuality on U.S. television. Scholars studying the genre contend that soap fans feel greater ownership over the text they are following than do fans of other television genres.24 They also observe that soap fans also enjoy greater access to producers, writers, and actors, and influence over storylines than do fans in other genres (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999; Harrington & Bielby, 1995). Thus, Chapter 3 focuses on the efforts of two online groups of lesbian fans and critics to influence the depiction of Bianca following her coming out.

The “gay comfort level:”

Examining a media advocacy group’s efforts to combat youth homophobia

Experts and laypersons alike agree that the best way to reduce homophobia is to expose more people to sexual minorities—when heterosexuals are exposed to gay people, the comfort level mounts and the hatred dissipates. (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 7)

In Chapter 4, the object of analysis shifts to the efforts of a media advocacy group to redress the stigma of youth homosexuality on television. Here, my focus is on an initiative by

24 A number of reasons account for why the issue of authorship is so complex for the soap opera genre. Many people are involved in writing soap operas. Also, soaps, with few exceptions, downplay the notion of individual authors. And, many soap opera fans have been loyal viewers of their favorite programs for a long time; they often feel that they are more knowledgeable than the writing staff.
GLAAD, a report it sponsored and published in 2003 called, *How Youth Media Can Help Combat Homophobia Among American Teenagers* (Streitmatter, 2003). (See Figure 3.) Like the TV movie and soap opera storyline previously discussed, this report similarly sought to improve the lives of gay youth. But, here, rather than helping families become more supportive of their children, GLAAD’s intention was to ameliorate youth homophobia. Much research indicates that peer rejection and homophobia is just as pressing a problem as familial rejection in fostering negative outcomes for gay youth. A school climate survey, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, found that homophobic hostility – verbal and sexual harassment and physical assault – was prevalent in elementary and high schools, and it was perpetrated both by peers and educators (Kosciw & Cullen, 2002). A 2001 report by Human Rights Watch also documented widespread discrimination and physical violence against LGBT students in U.S. schools. The 2001 Hamilton College Gay Issues Poll, a national poll of graduating high school seniors that was co-released by MTV, found that 9 out of 10 students reported that gay epithets were used in their schools to describe students who were not liked; half had heard classmates insult gay students by calling them “faggot,” “homo,” or “dyke” (“Hamilton College,” 2001). “Even though all these positive things are going on and kids are starting gay/straight alliances, kids are still harassed. It’s still O.K. to make gay jokes, kids are still afraid to come out, and suicide rates are still high, so you can’t say that gay kids are accepted,” said one youth advocate in a *New York Times* article (as cited in Lombardi, 2002, para 7).
Like Rose and Nixon, Rodger Streitmatter, the author of the GLAAD report, believes that mass media can be a tool to make the lives of gay youth better, by changing the attitudes of straight youth. He believes this will lessen youth homophobia.\textsuperscript{25} His specific intervention involved a study, conducted in fall 2002, in which he examined youth attitudes toward gay people depicted in youth-targeted television programs and magazines. His research design involved young people viewing clips of television programs and reading magazine articles that featured gay people and then completing questionnaires assessing their

\textsuperscript{25} Streitmatter (2003, p. 31) initially decided to include only straight youth in his study because he thought homophobia “to be a problem only among non-gay students.” During a focus group he conducted to “fine tune” his survey questionnaires, though, a student mentioned to him that homophobic language was very commonly used among her gay friends. After concluding that “the feelings that she had described were, indeed, a form of homophobia” (p. 32), he amended his research design to include gay youth.
The goal was to "identify the specific techniques and characteristics that young readers and viewers find most effective in increasing their comfort level vis-à-vis gay people" (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 8) to provide data for GLAAD to use to reach out to the mass media. This research, then, was intended to generate best practices for the makers of youth-targeted magazines and television programs in the representation of LGBT youth.

GLAAD, as Streitmatter (2003) noted, has worked since its formation in the late 1980s to advocate for more positive depictions of LGBT persons in popular culture. A key aspect of this project has been to work "behind the scenes" with media producers during the writing and production of media products featuring LGBT persons (see also Capsuto, 2000).

Underpinning Streitmatter’s report is his belief that “the power wielded by teen-oriented magazines and television programs can be harnessed to reduce the damage” of youth homophobia (2003, p. 5). He cited other successful interventions among young people, especially in the area of changing health attitudes and behaviors, as evidence for this claim, along with research showing the ubiquity and importance of mass media in young people’s lives. Streitmatter also highlighted the impact of gay and lesbian storylines in magazines and television programs, most notably, the powerful rendering of Pedro Zamora, a cast member on the third season (1994) of MTV’s long-running reality series The Real World Chicago.

Streitmatter (2003) administered questionnaires to first-year students at his university (n=200) in four different groups during the fall of 2002. Questionnaires assessed attitudes toward the gay and lesbian characters and cast members depicted in the magazine articles and TV programs included in the study. Streitmatter met with respondents in three sessions, with the first session involving data collection for the magazine sample, the second involving data collection for Dawson’s Creek and Buffy the Vampire, and the third involving data collection for The Real World Chicago.

In his introduction, Streitmatter (2003) drew examples and evidence from work in the social learning and cultivation frameworks, as well as “edutainment” interventions, to ground discussion of the importance of mass media in the lives of young people.
World. Zamora went on the program with a dual mission: to show others (1) what living with AIDS as a young person was like and (2) to show what being young, gay, and romantically involved was like (Muñoz, 1998). Streitmatter noted how Zamora had a powerful influence, both on his housemates and on viewers; his story was made more dramatic when, tragically, he died the day after the last episode of the season was cablecast.

Streitmatter’s (2003) rationale for his study:

Research has shown that the media represent a powerful force in the lives of young people, with studies finding that youthful readers and viewers often change their behavior based on the messages that media products communicate to them. Research also has shown, however, that youthful media consumers do not blindly accept and embrace every message that is sent their way. If young people like an individual portrayed in a particular article or program, they will be greatly influenced by him or her. But if they do not have a positive reaction to such an individual, young people will reject the character as well as the entire message surrounding that character. (pp. 8-9)

Similar to Chapter 2, Chapter 3 critically examines a model for challenging stigma. In the chapter on The Truth About Jane, I scrutinize the implicit assumptions undergirding writer-director Lee Rose’s approach to making mothers more accepting of their children’s homosexuality and argue that this strategy actually maintains the stigma of youth homosexuality. The purpose of Chapter 4 is similar in that I challenge Streitmatter’s focus on making straight youth “comfortable.” Streitmatter began his report with excerpts from a
2001 article in Out. One excerpt is a quote by a young straight male viewer testifying to how watching *The Real World* has made him more comfortable seeing gay male sexuality:

The first time I saw them [two gay guys on “The Real World’] holding hands and kissing, I couldn’t help but feel a little uncomfortable simply because I’d never seen it before. However, I got used to it quickly. -- Cory Murphy, a straight teenager viewer (as cited in Streitmatter, 2003, p. 1)

This view underpins the hypotheses Streitmatter (2003) posited for the television component of his study. Streitmatter (2003, p. 61) also attributed these presumptions to “conventional wisdom,” as well as to his years as a classroom teacher and media practitioner. He is a professor at American University. Some of the six television hypotheses are worth highlighting:

- Hypothesis 3: Young television viewers are more comfortable with a gay or lesbian character (or real gay person, in the case of *The Real World*) if those viewers perceive that person as having struggled to accept his or her sexuality. (p. 54)

- Hypothesis 4: Young television viewers are comfortable with dialogue about being gay and with limited physical contact between gay persons, but those viewers become uncomfortable when gay characters (or real gay persons, in the case of *The Real World*) are shown having “intimate” physical contact with each other. (p. 55)
Hypothesis 5: Young viewers are more comfortable with a gay man or a lesbian on TV if those viewers find him or her to be a person of character— with integrity and strong moral values. (p. 57)

Streitmatter also hypothesized that young people like gay or lesbian characters/cast members if they are physically attractive and do not possess stereotypically gay or lesbian traits.

It is clear that Streitmatter, like Rose, is well-intentioned. He wants to do something about the problem of youth homophobia. But, his thinking takes as a starting point what youth are currently comfortable with; it ignores the possibility that media have shaped these assumptions and limits, and then assumes that media can change what youth find comfortable. His thinking is constitutive of the “mainstreaming” philosophy underpinning strategies used by many gay rights organizations such as GLAAD (Vaid, 1995, p. 36). This strategy of legitimation is shortsighted, Vaid argued. It is part of a larger politics of assimilation that, too often, makes concessions for acceptance.

What I want to do is consider another approach, that of critical media literacy, as an alternative intervention. I want to recast an “ad hoc” focus group conducted by Streitmatter (2003, see p. 56) with a small subgroup of respondents after the administration of his questionnaires. He wanted to probe a surprising finding: that youth were comfortable, to some degree, seeing scenes of gay male and lesbian intimacy in youth-targeted programming. A core belief of critical media literacy is that media representations (and, more broadly, the construction of knowledge in a society) are embedded in a society’s power relations and, thus, cannot be devoid of ideology. Also, it considers how issues of political economy – for instance, the increasing consolidation of globalized mass media industries – must be considered when examining media representations.
For us, critical viewing entails critiquing texts in a way that challenges their ideology--their values, views, and representations of reality. Critical reading or viewing may thus involve creating oppositional or resistant readings and filling in omissions and exclusions in the text through discussion, writing, and recreating texts in multiple ways using a variety of technologies. It may also question the holding and distribution of power in the text, asking who has it, who doesn't, who gains, and who loses in situations and events. In this sense students would analyze and deconstruct representations of power and discuss how power is made acceptable, natural, and the norm. (Semali & Hammett, 1999, p. 367)

Using this approach, the focus group that Streitmatter conducted becomes a starting point to probe both the students’ and teacher’s “comfort level” with scenes of gay and lesbian intimacy and sexuality, as well as students’ and teacher’s assumptions about tolerance, media representation, and social justice. In Chapter 4, I use The Real World Chicago, the 11th season of the series (2002) and one of three TV programs included in Streitmatter’s study, to demonstrate this approach.

Conclusion

In the first part of this introductory chapter, I scrutinized the increasing overtures being made by some in the U.S. television industry in the late 1990s toward the inclusion of gay male and lesbian youth characters in youth-targeted programming. I focused on how and why these TV makers had come to view the depiction of gay male and lesbian youth as necessary, if still controversial, to be considered realistic; other factors motivating this change were the sense that such storylines could be narratively appealing and furthering of television’s mission to be inclusive. In the second part of the chapter, I introduced three
specific efforts by TV insiders and outsiders in the early 2000s that were framed as addressing problems faced by gay male and lesbian youth in their families and their schools. I discussed the specific strategies used by these individuals and groups to redress the stigma of youth homosexuality, focusing on how these strategies were shaped by their conceptions of audience tastes, network prerogatives, genre considerations, and visibility strategies. The next three chapters carry out the analyses that were framed here.
CHAPTER 2

“One mother's love”:

A Lifetime telefilm focuses on parental responses to youth homosexuality

Lifetime advertises itself as “television for women,” but tonight, it’s television for everyone--for gay children and their parents, who need to know that they're not alone; and for everyone else who cares about America's families. (Miller, 2000, para 11)

Premiering less than two years after Matthew Shepard’s death (and dedicated to Shepard and “all the men and women … who love differently”) the 2000 Lifetime telefilm *The Truth About Jane* speaks to the urgency of U.S. families providing a better climate for gay youth. Shepard’s brutal murder, widely considered a hate crime motivated by his being gay, intensified focus on an ongoing object of public attention in the 1990s -- the precarious position of gay youth, often rejected by their families and vulnerable to a range of maladies, from substance abuse and homelessness to suicide and prostitution. The made-for-TV movie focuses on the relationship between Jane (played by Ellen Muth), a 15-year-old on the verge of coming out, and her mother Janice (played by Stockard Channing), who finds it difficult to accept her daughter’s lesbianism. Lee Rose, a TV veteran who wrote and directed the film, says she wanted American families to see real people going through these struggles.

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The telefilm’s tagline is, "One mother's love...her daughter's sexuality...and the truth they will face together."
and to know that their families could be strengthened by the experience (Hodges, 2000; Mills, 2000). A plethora of research indicates that supportive parents can aid gay and lesbian children in not only coming out earlier but being resistant to negative behaviors (Beaty, 1999; Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Harrison, 2003). The telefilm was Lifetime’s most-watched made-for-television movie in five years, with an audience of 3.6 million households, and also the highest-rated film shown on any basic cable channel that year (Dempsey, 2000).

_The Truth About Jane_ is “one of the few I’ve seen about coming out that empathetically portrays the struggles of both parent and child without pathologizing either one,” said a critic writing for _Psychology Today_ (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 35). As Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) note, the few previous made-for-television movies that have addressed youth homosexuality have framed it in tragic terms. They have also constructed it exclusively in terms of sexual activity: Unlike straight youth, for whom sexuality is usually depicted as only one facet of their lives, gay youth are rendered as either hypersexual or completely asexual.\(^{29}\) These telefilms suggest that sexually active gay youth are unhappy or deviant or that their sexuality is situational and/or transitive, attributing it to having experienced violence, imprisonment, madness, military service, poverty, or a dysfunctional family. Conversely, what seems like a more positive depiction of gay youth -- youth homosexuality is presented as a stable and essential part of one’s identity (and not attributed to these factors) – is marred because gay youth are rendered as absent of any sexual or romantic feelings.

Both frames have rendered gay youth as miserable and isolated. Unlike earlier telefilms, _The Truth About Jane_ tries to reassure viewers that gay youth can be just as well-

\(^{29}\) As Tropiano (2002) further notes, the depiction of youth homosexuality in the TV movie is often congruent with historically contingent psychological understandings of the origins, “treatment” of, and fluidity of youth homosexuality.
adj usted as heterosexual youth. Jane’s sexuality is presented as stable and normal, and, rather than rupturing the family, truth actually makes it stronger and healthier. Rose solicited input during the scriptwriting process from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and Parents and Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG). Rose said, “I had a responsibility at some point in my career to tell a story that could walk a kid or a parent through a minefield” (as cited in Kaye, 2001, para 14). Indeed, the narrative trajectories of both Jane and Janice, in coming to terms, respectively, with being a lesbian and having a lesbian daughter, can be mapped along prominent social psychological models. In the first part of the film, the viewer sees Jane move through stages --- confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis – observed by Cass (1979) as typical among gay and lesbian youth in forming their identities (Eisenberg, 2000):

- Starting high school, Jane is teased by classmates for not being interested in boys. Soon thereafter, she starts to develop intense feelings for a female classmate, Taylor, with whom she becomes fast friends (Identity Confusion); (See Figure 4.)
- Jane tries to disavow her feelings for Taylor, even after they have a sexual encounter. When her parents confront her, she denies that she is a lesbian (Identity Comparison);
- In duress after Taylor breaks up with her, and amid a worsening relationship with her mother, Jane sneaks into a gay and lesbian club. She also seeks advice from Jimmie, her mother’s friend and a gay man, on how to resolve her guilt and anguish about not being honest with her family (Identity Tolerance);

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30 The Truth About Jane marked the first time that PFLAG was involved in the making of an entertainment product (Hodges, 2000).
During a climactic dinner scene, spurred by teasing from her younger brother, Jane outs herself to her parents. Her voiceover reveals relief and a nascent sense of pride in her identity (Identity Acceptance);

- Jane clings to her newfound identity, even as her mother urges her to “get over this nonsense” (by sending her to a therapist and threatening to send her away to boarding school) (Identity Pride); and

- After a teacher, whom Jane trusts, makes Janice realize that she might lose her daughter unless she accepts her for “who she is,” the two start to mend their relationship. Jane takes her mother to a PFLAG meeting and seems more comfortable with her sexuality (Identity Synthesis).

(See Appendix A for a more thorough overview of these steps.) Similarly, Janice’s path to acceptance, which occupies the brunt of narrative attention in the second part of the film, follows the five stages that Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) identify as normative for
parents coming to terms with learning that their children are gay or lesbian: shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance.\textsuperscript{31}

- Janice receives a phone call from an anonymous caller saying that Jane is a lesbian and is completely unhinged, asking who would play such a “sick joke” (\textit{Shock});

- Janice and Robert, her husband, are convinced that Jane, while she may have been observed kissing Taylor by the anonymous caller, is heterosexual and that she was just practicing (for kissing boys). Calling Taylor “too mature” for her age, though, Janice wants Jane to stay away from the young woman (\textit{Denial});

- Finally confronted with the reality of her daughter’s sexuality, Janice becomes convinced that something she did as a mother caused Jane’s lesbianism (\textit{Guilt});

- Janice rebuffs her friends when they call her out on her bigotry. Likewise, she grows apart from Robert, who is critical of her for not being a ‘loving mother’ to a daughter in need. Janice is livid when Ms. Wolcott (Jane’s high school teacher) comes to speak to her about Jane (\textit{Anger})

- When Janice learns from Ms. Wolcott that Jane has become so despondent that she has threatened suicide, she is made to realize that she must start to accept Jane, lest she lose her daughter. Janice starts to go to PFLAG meetings, and, while she continues to struggle (e.g., she’s not ready to “shout from the rooftops” the fact that Jane is a lesbian), she pushes herself, by the end of the

\textsuperscript{31} The authors found that most parents ultimately accepted their children’s sexuality, but the process was difficult and occurred in stages, taking about two years for most to reach acceptance (Robertson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989).
film, to attend, out in the open, a PFLAG rally to show support for her daughter

(Acceptance).

(See Appendix B for a more thorough overview of Janice’s development trajectory.)

The scene below occurs about halfway through the film. (See Figure 5.) It takes place at the home of Ms. Wolcott on the night that Jane has run away:

Janice: Can I ask you a question? When did you first feel that you were…um…

Jane: A lesbian? It’s okay. You can say it without becoming one.

Jane: I’ve always known I was different. I didn’t feel a part of things. I’m not sure when it became clear. Probably last year. But, I guess it’s always been inside of me.

Janice: What’s the hardest part about it?

Jane: That the people who care about you will hate you.

Janice: I would never hate you.

Jane: I don’t think I’m going to change, and I know you want me to. So, what do we do?

Janice: I don’t know – just try harder. I will if you will. I don’t know if I’m ever going to accept it. And, frankly, I don’t know if I could understand what you’re doing. We’ll take it day by day.
From then on, the film focuses on Janice’s slow and arduous coming to terms with Jane’s sexuality. The driving questions become, will Janice confront her internalized homophobia and grow to accept Jane’s lesbianism, and can she be the loving mother she wants to be? Although both “journeys” (that of Jane and Janice) are narrated fully, what Rose seems to find most interesting is the dilemma Janice faces: A woman who thinks that being a mother is “the best job in the world” and who considers herself liberal and has gay friends, who nonetheless, finds it difficult to accept the fact that her daughter is a lesbian. “Janice is not a villain,” Rose insists (Byrne, 2000, para 8). Instead, her story is common – something that Rose experienced, in the reaction of her own mother, when she came out (Mills, 2000). Amid what she sees as a crisis facing gay youth Rose thinks this is a story that needs to be told. And, she believes that parents need to be treated sympathetically.

Rose believes she can best foster parental acceptance for gay youth by having the audience identify with Janice as a wife and mother and framing her not only sympathetically
but heroically. Considering her objective, it makes sense, then, that she decided to work with Lifetime. The channel targets heterosexual white middle-class women, much like Janice, who see themselves as “wives and mothers” (Byars & Meehan, 1995; Rasmusson, 2001). Furthermore, the trajectory of the Lifetime made-for-TV movie typically focuses on the wife-mother protagonist’s inner transformation and empowerment. 32 This chapter scrutinizes the implicit assumptions of Rose’s strategy, in particular, her modeling of Janice’s transformation along the line of psychological models for healthy approaches to the disclosure of a child’s homosexuality.

Research indicates that involvement in support groups like PFLAG enables many parents to be accepting of their children’s gay or lesbian sexual identities (Bernstein, 1995; Feinstein, 1982; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; & Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). The telefilm supports this view by showing PFLAG involvement to be a key part of Janice’s transformation. Fields (2001), though, has examined the “identity work” done by mothers in such groups as they work toward acceptance of their children’s homosexuality. She argues that such efforts to redress stigma can reproduce it because they are based on unexamined heteronormative conceptions of healthy development, good parenting, etc., and because the goal of the identity work actually is to counter the stigma that such parents still hold about their being parents of gay children. In line with Fields’s (2001) argument, I also see the depiction of Janice’s identity work within the terms of the Lifetime movie as reproducing the stigma of youth homosexuality because it frames Janice as being hard hit by learning her

32 Made-for-television films (what would later be named, “Lifetime Originals”) became a key part of Lifetime’s programming and branding strategy, starting in 1990, and they have played an important role in the network’s growth. A narrative formula was cemented, centering on a strong, but vulnerable empowered heroine who is transformed by saving her family from some threat.
child is a lesbian. Rose situates this depiction of a woman grieving the loss of the daughter she thought she had within the larger story of a woman grieving her own loss of self.

*Grieving the “loss” of her daughter and herself*

Janice: When you first told us, I thought, what have I done wrong as a mother? And, I did think, what will people say, what will I tell my friends? But, my first reaction was, I didn’t want your life to be any harder than it had to be. The world is not a nice place…and, I guess I had the same dream that any mother has for her little girl: that you’d meet a good man, you’d fall in love, you’d get married, you’d have children.

Jane: Those are your dreams.

In its characterization of her, *The Truth About Jane* early on conveys that Janice has “pinned all of [her] hopes and dreams” on Jane. Although she seems complacent with being a stay-at-home mother (it’s the “best job in the world,” she tells Jane), her “overattention” to her daughter’s life at the point when Taylor becomes more prominent in Jane’s life seems to indicate otherwise (e.g., obsessing about why Jane does not want to have a Sweet 16 party, why she is not dating, why she is spending so much time with Taylor). During a blow up, Jane yells at her mother, “You know what you can’t stand that I’d rather be with her [Taylor] than with you.” Jane is, in fact, the only point of conversation that Janice has with her friends, Jimmie and Beth, who note, with regret, how Janice used to be a wild child. They all agree that she is in danger of turning into her mother now. So, whereas Jane is having an adolescent crisis and doing the identity work emblematic of it, Janice is characterized as someone who never fully developed. In its rendering of Janice, the film is a critique of older, now criticized, conceptions of female identity as being completely fulfilled by marriage and
motherhood. Janice is not fulfilled in marriage and motherhood. Jane’s adolescent crisis reveals to Janice that she has her own growing up to do, and this fuels her own journey of empowerment and internal triumph.

Janice, like most Lifetime heroines, goes through an empowering transformation that leads her, ultimately, to being redeemed. The viewer sees Janice struggling at a family picnic, joined by her son Ned and friends Jimmie, and Beth, Jane’s brother affectionately teases Jane about her sexuality. Janice receives praise from everyone at the table for telling Brad to watch his mouth. When the discussion turns to an upcoming gay pride rally, Janice confesses that she doesn’t think she can come: “I’m getting better, but I don’t think I’m ready to shout it from the rooftops yet.” All around the table, there is silence. Janice goes to talk to Jane that night to tell her that she is doing her best to “get better,” but Jane contends, “It’s all private, it’s all safe. You don’t really accept me unless you do it out in the open.” Later that night, Robert tells her he is proud of her. Janice, though, tearfully admits to still being troubled by Jane’s lesbianism. “I hear they have a saying in AA – to act ‘as if,’ as if you

\[33\] In his influential theorization of development, Erikson (1968) argued that interpersonal issues were a more important part of female identity than vocational or ideological (i.e., external) issues, that women’s identity is left unresolved in adolescence and only achieved in marriage and motherhood, and that female identity development is less sequential and stage specific than that of men (Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992). This aspect of Erikson’s theory has been criticized for modeling healthy identity on a “primarily Eurocentric male model of normality” and reinforcing a view of female gender as bound to biology (Archer, 1992, p. 29). As Josselson (1988) noted, Erikson’s case samples were, with rare exception, of white males, and he initially generalized his findings to encompass women, as well. There is an “assumption that if one is not an individual with a distinct sense of identity, then one is intimate, connected, communal, caring, and probably female” (Archer, 1992, p. 27).

\[34\] Stockard Channing, who plays Janice, agreed: Rather than make her difficulty that of having a lesbian daughter, it was more interesting and accurate, she believed, to focus on how Janice dealt with, at one moment, having a life focused on her daughter and, the next, that world being upset: she now had to face a child growing up and apart and having to come to terms with her own life (Mills, 2000).
understand or accept something when you really don’t. And, that’s what I’m doing, acting as if. Because it still breaks my heart.” Afterwards, we see Janice attending a PFLAG meeting by herself, yet she is unable to tell others that her daughter is a lesbian.

The climax of the film is the staging of a gay pride rally that Jane and her father attend, as do Jane’s high school teacher, Ms. Wolcott, and her partner – who are no longer afraid of being seen in public. Earlier, Janice had disappointed everyone when she told them she could not come to the rally. The camera focuses on a sad looking Jane as she scans the crowd for signs of her mother. As another mother makes a speech at the dais, the camera reveals Janice making her way to join Jane and Robert, to her daughter’s delight. The telefilm ends here with the following voiceover by Jane… “An hour ago, I didn’t think I had a mother. But, now I think I may be meeting her for the very first time.” Jane’s voiceover continues, “My mother was finally exactly the person she was meant to be. I was so proud of how well she had grown up.” (See Figure 6.)

*Figure 6.* Jane and Janice have forged a closer, and healthier, relationship by film’s end.
Identity work

At first, I thought it was me. Then, I thought, what will people think about me? What kind of horrible mother am I? Then, when I had almost lost my child because of my ignorance, I found her again in who she was – was exactly the way she was always meant to be – a good child, a kind child, my child. [Crying.] What I came to realize was that none of this has anything to do with us. And, we, as parents, need to let them live their lives as they see fit. Thank you. [Applause.]

This scene, occurring soon after the scene at Ms. Wolcott’s, takes place at a PFLAG meeting to which Jane has taken her mother. The middle-aged mother who is at the podium seems to be speaking for Janice when she says that she almost lost her adult lesbian daughter by not accepting her. This foreshadows the work Janice needs to do. The viewer has just seen Janice, who is being introduced to other parents, not be able to say that she is the mother of a lesbian. And, like Janice, this mother says she experienced a sense of loss of certain hopes and dreams she had for her child upon learning that her daughter was not heterosexual, a sentiment seemingly common in parents, according to some social-psychological research.

“It may be that parents experience grief similar to the grief felt by parents whose child has died; they are accepting the ‘death’ of dreams for a heterosexual child and the birth of new dreams and a changed relationship with their homosexual child,” observed Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989, p. 60), who conducted a study of 402 parents (recruited mostly through PFLAG) of lesbian, gay, and bisexual children. The authors observed a 46-year-old
mother, who, after learning that her daughter was a lesbian, confessed, “I mourned her as if she had died. I felt like she had died, though intellectually I knew she was alive” (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989, pp. 67–68).

Using data derived from participant observation and interviews with members of a local chapter of a national organization not dissimilar to PFLAG35, Fields (2001) contends that disclosure of gay and lesbian identity extends a discredited identity to some straight parents; they have a “courtesy” stigma (Fields, 2001, p. 166, italics removed).36 “The parents struggled to recover from the loss not only of their-children-as-normal but also of themselves-as-normal. They worried that they had failed to protect their sons and daughters from deviance, and they felt vulnerable to charges that they had fostered it,” Fields notes (p. 171). As with Robinson, Walters, and Skeen's (1989) finding, most parents went to meetings of the group to deal with their “loss.” One of Fields’s participants, Donna, a mother of four children (three of whom were gay or lesbian) said, at her first meeting, “I guess it’s like any crisis—cancer, a car accident. You need time to recover” (Fields, 2001, p. 171). Fields adds, “Those who hold and who wish to maintain conventionally moral social standings as mothers and fathers must reestablish their children and themselves as ‘normal’” (p. 166).

This is because of a presumed “causal” (p. 166) association between parental influence and youth homosexuality.

Through an analysis of “testimonial” narratives (e.g., parents talking to other parents, speaking at meetings and workshops, participating in public forums and parades, etc.), Fields

35 The name of the organization was masked to protect members’ anonymity.

36 Fields draws from Goffman’s (1963) work on how stigma imputes a “spoiled identity” to its holders. See Grossman (1997) for a discussion of how homosexuality stigmatizes the identity of adolescents who identify as gay or lesbian.
(2001) found that parental discourses concerning children were directed toward “normalizing” them, while those conducted on one’s own behalf sought to “normify” the parents themselves.\(^{37}\) “Normalizing” discourses were used to recuperate children as “normal” in the context of prescriptive heteronormative gender and sexuality roles (e.g., endorsing their children’s participation in heterosexual rituals such as prom and marriage, expressing admiration and relief in their adhering to normative definitions of gender appropriate definitions of masculinity and femininity, and praising their children’s monogamy). “Normifying” discourses were used to recuperate parents’ beliefs in themselves as good parents (e.g., using the “moral authority” stemming from their status as heterosexual, middle-class parents, “good parents,” to advocate on behalf of gay and lesbian “children.”) The parents lose moral standing because of their new identity (having a gay or lesbian child) but also receive status from it because they can now speak out and for their gay children.

Although all of the parents in Fields’s (2001) study accepted that they could not change their children’s homosexuality – and, some, even, came to view it in exceedingly positive terms – their “identity work” never entailed questioning the heteronormative assumptions undergirding gender and sexual identity categories or the role of class in determining their value as parents. They saw everything, including their sense of good parenting and being moral, within the lens of heteronormativity, wherein heterosexuality is always rendered natural, stable, and universal and is usually not marked as sexuality. Within this lens, their children, in spite of their being gay, could still have proms, weddings, and children – the things expected in the heterosexual script for a child to deliver to one’s

\(^{37}\) These are “discrete social processes,” Fields (2001, p. 166) notes. Normalization involves a “normal testif[y]ing on behalf of the stigmatized other” while normification involves “social deviants appeal[ing] on their own behalf.”
parents. Parents accepted their “good” gay and lesbian sons and daughters, who could conform -- or be narrated as conforming with -- “healthy,” middle-class notions of stable and gender conforming identity. There was no room for queer gender and sexuality configurations (e.g., bisexual, dyke, butch, drag queens, and intersexed).

Although the parents' redefinition of "gay man," "lesbian woman," and "straight parent of gay or lesbian adult" as moral identities was oppositional identity work, acceptance of the parents and their children remained contingent on their adhering to norms of "good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality." As these parents based their claim to moral standing on the extent to which they and their children embodied conventional expectations of women, men, and parents, they also muted the sexual pluralism that they and their children might have represented. They argued that they and their children should be allowed to participate in mainstream society because they posed no real threat to the gender and sexual norms at its foundation. Thus, while these parents claimed new status for gay and lesbian people and their parents, their strategies left the norms defining dominant sexual hierarchies unchallenged.

(Fields, 2001, p. 175)

Fields views this sort of liberal tolerance as problematic. Parents’ “identity work” “simultaneously provide(s) the foundation for stigma, an avenue out of deviance, and the means by which stigma is perpetuated” (Fields, 2001, p. 168).
“None of this has anything to do with us."38

The Truth About Jane naturalizes the notion that youth homosexuality hits a mother, and family, hard, and that it is something that takes time and work to recover from. Speaking of Janice, Rose said, “She doesn’t have a miraculous recovery, but she does get better” (as cited in Byrne, 2000, para 8). This focus on discursive empowerment embodies what White sees as constitutive of women’s television: confessional-therapeutic discourse.39

The telefilm’s emphasis on homosexuality leaves heterosexuality unmarked and unexamined. The Truth About Jane never asks why, for example, loving parents expect their children to be heterosexual. Instead, it reinforces the view that only “homosexual object choice’ must be explained, since it deviates from the heterosexual norm” (Chambers, 2001, p. 169). The film naturalizes heteronormative conceptions of healthy development where gay or lesbian identity would necessarily be different and less desirable, where it is always a departure for a child to turn out gay and not something that is considered as an option, where the hopes and dreams pinned on a child, of course, will be shattered by a child who does not conform and rationalizes a limited sort of parental acceptance where “loving parents” will, of course, struggle to accept their gay children: What else could they do? The

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38 This is part of the testimonial Janice hears from another mother of a gay child at the PFLAG meeting Jane takes her to.

39 White (1992) sought to update Foucault’s (1978) understanding of confession for a television-centered media culture where confession, and therapy, are ubiquitous (and are especially constitutive of “women’s television”). Confessional and therapeutic discourses are central to television narrative, motivating plot developments and resolutions, even constituting the mode of narrativization. This structuring positions the female viewer as a member of a heterosexual couple or family and as the buyer of household goods. While White does not focus on the Lifetime telefilm – she analyzed highly interactive daytime game shows, matchmaker shows, and family and religious programs – we can see “confessional-therapeutic discourse” as being constitutive of the network’s narratives. This is shown in its films’ focus on a (white) heterosexual woman coming to empowerment through discourse/revelation.
end of the film illustrates this point. Janice is praised for how far she has come (i.e., Jane’s voiceover, as Janice reunites with the family at the demonstration at the end of the film: “My mother was exactly who she was meant to be”). Yet, she is still ambivalent about her daughter’s sexuality.
CHAPTER 3

Being Erica Kane’s daughter: An analysis of All My Children’s early 2000s lesbian storyline

The theme of All My Children from the beginning is the belief that, as God's children, we are all bound to each other by our common humanity despite our many personal differences; that it is our failure to understand and respect those differences that causes most of life's pain and suffering... The Bianca story is our latest effort to dramatize that belief. -- Agnes Nixon, the soap’s creator (as cited in “All My Children,” 2003, para 5)

U.S. soap operas have tackled many social issues over the years. These include drug addiction, mental illness, sexual dysfunction, incest, teenage runaways, breast cancer, and racial intolerance. Until the early 1990s, though, homosexuality was rarely broached by the genre. In summer 1992, One Life to Live ran a short but widely-regarded storyline involving Billy Douglas, a gay male teenager, who struggled to come out to his family, only to be disowned by them when he did. Three years later, All My Children ventured further with a longer-running storyline involving a gay schoolteacher, Michael Delaney, who comes under

40 Agnes Nixon is known for tackling social issues in her programs (Anger, 1999; Williams, 1992).

41 The Billy Douglas storyline overlapped with one involving a recurring character, Rev. Andrew Carpenter, confronting his homophobic father about the death of the Reverend's brother from AIDS.
fire in the community for coming out in the classroom. Delaney later befriends a closeted gay teen, Kevin Sheffield, who seeks his support.

These storylines were heralded for being milestones in a genre that had had virtually no gay or lesbian characters in its history. Yet, both heeded certain “conditions of representability”: The storylines were short-term and problem-based; involved non-core characters (i.e., individuals who are not members of the one or two main families at the heart of a soap opera’s fictional community); and avoided the depiction of gay intimacy and desire (Harrington, 2003b, p. 216). When both characters were written out, this left the social order fundamentally intact and fundamentally heterosexual.42

The preceding discussion helps explain why the 2000-2001 coming out storyline involving Bianca Montgomery was so significant.43 In many ways, Bianca moves beyond the previous terms of representation: Her romantic life is alluded to; her sexuality is presented as a core part of herself; and she is a long-running character who is familiar to viewers and well-liked (Harrington, 2003b). Harrington has published two studies examining the Bianca coming out storyline: one examining the storyline’s production context (2003a) and one examining narrative developments and viewer response (2003b). As Harrington (2003a) notes, Bianca differs in another key way: She is a core character: the daughter of femme fatale Erica Kane.

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42 Fuqua (1997, p. 200) explains the mechanisms by which the genre simultaneously tackles a range of social issues but also maintains a social order structured by “bourgeois family ideals” (Butler, 1990, pp. 155): “Conventionally, the issue du jour is introduced … through the arrival of a new and oftentimes marginal or peripheral character. Soap operas deploy tentative story-lines through the introduction of these marginal characters so that if the narratives prove too problematic, the new character(s) can be written off or redirected”

43 In July 2000, Bianca Montgomery returned, after a two-year absence, to Pine Valley, the fictional community in which the ABC soap All My Children (AMC) is set, with a “secret.” After months of agonizing, she finally told her mother that she is a lesbian in late December.
Allen’s (1985) study of soap opera storytelling helps explain the significance of Bianca being Erica’s daughter. Drawing from structural linguistics, Allen observed that the narrative structure of daytime soap opera is mediated between two axes: syntagmatic (combinatory) and paradigmatic (associative). In soap opera storytelling, there is a tension between story and plot development that can be resolved quickly (syntagmatic axis) and a focus on characters and settings and dense interrelationships that are ongoing (paradigmatic axis). Each axis has complex features in its own right. One of these complex features is that, with its ongoing serial form, closure is never fully achieved. This aspect compels more attention on characterization and motivates a slower, extended storytelling style. Because relationships matter more than events in terms of soap opera storytelling, being a member of a core family means that a character will be given more attention. Thus, Allen (1985, p. 70) surmised, “Who a character is’ is as much a function of his or her place in this paradigmatic system as what he or she ‘does’ in a syntagmatic sense.”

At the same time, while soap temporality may be slower than in other narrative genres, storylines have to have endings. By late summer 2001, writers and producers viewed the story arc – that of “a gay teen’s struggle to embrace her sexuality and live life to the fullest, and a parent’s difficult struggle to accept her daughter’s sexuality” (Harrington, 2003a, p. 225) – as being done. Jean Dadario Burke, the Executive Producer, told Soap Opera Digest, “We achieved our goals, and the writers did a magnificent job” (as cited in Harrington, 2003b, p. 223). By the fall, Bianca’s coming out storyline had moved to the “back burner.”

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Unlike other serial narrative forms, soap operas have no full closure, only temporary endpoints. Another distinctive feature is the large number of characters, which, Allen (1985) noted, trumps all but the most complex novels. An individual character’s fate matters far less than the preservation of the community.
The character still figured in storylines, and her sexuality was still referred to by other characters, but she was not involved in major storylines (Harrington, 2003b).

The end of the coming out storyline presented a new dilemma for *All My Children* (*AMC*). Whereas the few previous gay characters on soap operas were “dealt with” by being written out after the conclusion of their storylines, Bianca was a character who, for many reasons, could not be easily dispatched. It would have been untenable, after the much-lauded coming out arc (see Harrington, 2003b), to have Bianca denounce her lesbianism as just a phase. Perhaps more important is the fact that Bianca would always be a part of her mother Erica’s life (“Daytime Gets,” 2001).

In the conclusion of her study of the coming out storyline, Harrington (2003b) praised *AMC*’s handling of the story. She also declared, based on results from a survey she conducted of fans using the website SoapCentral.com in March 2001, that audiences appeared more comfortable with seeing same-sex relationships in soap operas than she expected. Harrington also pointed to other indicators, such as fan feedback published in soap magazines, along with the informal polling conducted by the publications, of how the storyline was received. But, Harrington (2003b) also was unsure about the direction that Bianca’s future storylines would take: “While it remains unclear what level of on-screen intimacy they will tolerate, the long-term inclusion of homosexuality on soap operas necessitates that lesbian and gay characters fall in and out of love, as straight characters do” (2003b, p. 223). In Fall 2001, Harrington noted, producers had introduced a new female character, Frankie Stone, who appeared to be a potential love interest for Bianca.

Allen’s (1985) understanding of the necessity for soap opera storylines to involve characters in a spectrum of relationships (social, romantic, and kinship) underpinned part of Harrington’s (2003a) concern about future story possibilities for Bianca. Although the
network was comfortable with involving Bianca in social and kinship stories (for example, with her friends or her mother), it was hesitant, from the start, to involve Bianca in romantic storylines.

As Harrington (2003a) noted, AMC writers changed the character’s age – from 12 to 16 – upon her return to Pine Valley in 2000. This change in age, Harrington found, was attractive because it avoided the issue of homosexuality in early adolescence, which was deemed more controversial than that involving an older teenager. And, this change enabled writers to more reasonably focus on storylines involving Bianca’s relationship with her mother rather than focus on the character’s love life. The ongoing characterization of Bianca as unfulfilled in love – always pining for, and often being rebuffed, by other young women – was tenable because it connected with the ongoing depiction of Bianca being cursed by Erica’s difficulties achieving intimacy. By this point in the soap story, Erica had been married 10 times. Harrington’s (2003a) interviews with industry observers, including production personnel and soap journalists, had revealed insiders’ fears about doing the coming out storyline. While the storyline was seen as a way to generate interest in the genre, and also redress concerns about the genre’s relevance at a time when prime-time television increasingly included gay characters, it was also seen as risky, considering declining ratings in the prior decade. So, while Executive Producer Jean Dadario Burke in summer 2001 promised that “there is more ahead” for Bianca (as cited in 2003b, p. 223), Harrington was unsure whether the network would commit to fully realizing Bianca by giving her a love life.

This chapter follows up on this question: how will Bianca be rendered post-coming out? It does so through an analysis of subsequent storylines involving the character during a three-year period, from 2002 to 2005. Like Harrington (2003a), I am also interested in understanding the evolution of narrative developments within the context of institutional
constraints. What I am particularly interested in is better understanding the role that “extramedia” groups, – in particular, fans – played in determining Bianca’s post-coming out storylines.

In many ways, soap opera fandom is distinct from that of other television genres. Whereas the activities they engage in (e.g., going to industry sponsored soap functions, meeting with actors, having fan meetings, and writing to actors) are similar, soap opera fans feel more of a sense of “ownership” over their programs than do fans of other genres (Allen, 1985). This is due, in part, to the genre’s deemphasis of “authorship” and the fact that soap opera writers and producers have short tenures. It is also due to the longterm engagement many fans have with their programs. Another indicator of how embedded soap fans are in the industry apparatus is their relationship to the soap press. Bielby, Harrington, and Bielby (1999) note that the role played by specialized publications is unique to the genre. The soap press, the authors state, provides a space for fans to publicly criticize their programs, react to plot developments, and interact with other fans. This aspect also encourages fans to have more of a sense of autonomy and ownership than do fans in other genres.

Online technologies, starting with the use of electronic bulletin boards in the 1980s and early 1990s and, since then, with websites and blogs, have provided another space for soap opera fans to critically dissect storylines (Baym, 2000; Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). Furthermore, the Internet, Scardaville (1999) argues, has enabled a place for fans, who organize their own sites or participate in sites created by other fans, to meet outside of industry sponsored or subsidized places. These sites not only foster dialogue among fans, but they spur involvement with industry insiders, such as journalists, writers and producers, and actors, who take the sites seriously and often participate (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). “Fans have much more power now, and it’s because of the availability of the
Although soap opera fan activities are deeply embedded in the genre’s infrastructure, fan activism, Scardaville (1999) noted, has rarely been observed among soap opera viewers. She identified two predominant types of fan activism for prime-time programs: (1) advocacy groups trying to persuade broadcasters to provide better representations of particular groups or to suppress representations they did not like (see Montgomery, 1989); and (2) fans mobilizing to save programs such as *Once and Again* and *My So-called Life* from cancellation. The lack of soap fan activism is due, in part, to fans having more access to soap insiders; they have a forum in which to seek redress for their complaints. Also, because of the serial nature of soap opera storytelling, fans have hope that their desires will be satisfied in future plot developments (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). Scardaville (1999), however, found some evidence for the existence of soap opera fan activism in her analysis of a 10-year long campaign by a group of *Another World* fans to save their soap from cancellation.

This chapter focuses on the efforts of an online group of lesbian fans (BAM Fans) that formed to advocate for a romantic relationship between Bianca and Maggie, a character introduced in early 2002. Like the *Another World* fans studied by Scardaville (1999), BAM Fans engaged in online and offline activities (e.g., starting a petition drive; writing letters to the press, actors, and program executives; rallying in front of ABC Daytime headquarters;

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45 Sloane noted, though, that fan feedback is most likely to be incorporated when the show is struggling with ratings or the fans’ goals overlap with the course of action planned.

46 The group (was www.bamfans.com) formed in March 2003. The term, “BAM,” to connote its investment in the romantic relationship between Bianca and Maggie, represents the convention in soap opera fandom of creating acronyms for romantic couples.
and organizing a charity event) as part of their efforts to influence program makers. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7. Elizabeth Hendrickson (Maggie) and Eden Riegel (Bianca) wear “Love is BAM” t-shirts that were given to them by BAM Fans who had organized a visit to AMC’s studios on December 16, 2002.

I also analyze the role played by another online site, AfterEllen.com, which was formed in April 2002 to provide commentary and criticism pertaining to mass media images of lesbian and bisexual women. Similar to earlier forms of lesbian ad hoc media advocacy (see Alwood, 1996), AfterEllen was started by an individual, Sarah Warn, then a 29-year-old working in e-commerce, because she could not find adequate and substantive coverage, in either the mainstream press or in gay print and Web portals, of issues related to lesbian and bisexual female representation in media (Warn, n.d.).\textsuperscript{47} Filling a void, AfterEllen quickly became popular, and Warn was sought out for commentary in the mainstream media regarding the issue of lesbian visibility (see Rosen, 2003, for an illustration). Although the

\footnote{The name of the site refers to Ellen Degeneres and her eponymous TV program. In 1997, Degeneres and the character she played came out of the closet; the latter coming out was a historical milestone in that it marked the first time a title character on any prime-time U.S. program had come out. The implicit focus of AfterEllen, which is not affiliated with Degeneres, is in analyzing the nature and scope of post-\textit{Ellen} media representations of lesbian and bisexual females.}
site was formed with the goal of sharing news and information, and also criticism, it has also taken on a role as an advocate of better representations. During the period studied in this chapter, the site published 10 articles, written by Warn and another contributor, on Bianca’s post-coming out storyline.

My study focuses on the interplay between writers, directors, and network executives, on one side, and lesbian fan and advocacy groups, on the other side, in trying to influence Bianca’s post coming out narrative trajectory. The discussion below charts the evolution of Bianca’s storyline for a period of slightly more than three years, from fall 2001 through early 2005. I have organized the discussion of the post-coming out time period into five sections. Each section incorporates discussion of key plot developments, producer commentary, and the reactions of lesbian fans and critics and also the mainstream press.

Post-coming out storylines involving Bianca

Period 1 (September 2001 – December 2002). Plot developments in Fall 2001 continued themes set in place during the coming out arc. These themes include: Bianca’s desire to simultaneously step out from under her mother’s shadow and find love; Erica’s continued difficulty accepting Bianca’s sexuality and her emerging adulthood; Bianca’s frustration with her mother; and Erica’s fierce desire to protect her daughter. As previously noted, AMC writers introduced a new character, Frankie Stone in November, who quickly developed a close friendship with Bianca. Frankie is introduced as a hitchhiker hit by Erica’s speeding car. Erica suspects that Frankie is “faking” her injury to extract money and asks Bianca to befriend the young woman, who is also a lesbian, while she is recuperating, to keep tabs on her. The relationship between Frankie and Bianca soon blossoms into something more than friendship. Erica, none too pleased, plots to break the two up. Bianca soon tells Frankie that she is in love with her. This expression of love perplexes Frankie, who says she has never
been told that before. This distress causes Frankie to have a romantic encounter with J. R. Chandler, son of Adam Chandler. Bianca walks in on this tryst and leaves heartbroken. A dejected Frankie calls Erica and explains what happened, and Erica vows to kill her. Things take an even more tragic turn, though, when Frankie is found murdered immediately afterwards. Suspecting that Bianca killed Frankie, Erica confesses to the murder out of an effort to save her daughter.

Probably unanticipated to the program’s makers was the outcry that subsequently ensued among fans who were upset over Frankie’s murder. A December 25, 2001, edition of ABC Soaps in Depth noted the magazine had been “flooded” with viewer complaints about the plot development. It also mentioned that at least two online petitions had been set up by fans, “asking for Frankie's seemingly improbable return” (“Fans Cry Foul,” 2001, para 3).

The magazine also mentioned fan suspicions that Frankie had been killed off because AMC did not want to pursue involving Bianca in a lesbian relationship. Although AMC’s new head writer Richard Culliton held to his claim that Frankie had been planned only as a three month storyline (which was embedded in a broader murder mystery storyline), the program acknowledged fan criticism in February 2002, by bringing back the same actor, Elizabeth Hendrickson, who had played Frankie, in the role of Maggie Stone, Frankie’s twin sister. Maggie came to Pine Valley to solve her sister’s murder (“Hendrickson to Return,” 2002).

These developments clearly support Harrington’s (2003b) finding that viewers watching the coming out storyline supported Bianca having a relationship. Furthermore, the uproar over Frankie’s murder, and the response it yielded (AMC introducing the Maggie character), concur with the previous discussion of the influence soap fans have in the genre (see Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999; Harrington & Bielby, 1995). These developments also highlight something not mentioned previously: the presence of lesbian followers and fan-
activists who were invested in the Bianca storyline. This point is significant because the soap opera audience has typically been constructed as mostly heterosexual female (Allen, 1985). Yet, the introduction of Maggie as a straight character also illustrates: (1) the producers’ continuing reticence to insert Bianca in clear romantic scenarios, and (2) their “banking” on fans to continue to be invested in the storyline. This tension, between fans and program makers, is key to understanding the evolution of the storyline.

The emergence, soon after Maggie’s introduction, of an online fan group, “BAM Fans,” to advocate for a Bianca and Maggie romantic pairing, illustrates how fan desires were already in place for Bianca to have a romantic partner. (The group’s website was launched in March 2003.) The campaign the group started, “Love is BAM!,” to encourage producers to make explicit the (romantic) relationship between Bianca and Maggie (“About BAM Fans,” 2003). (See Figure 8.) Although Bianca initially suspects Maggie is working for Vanessa, her and Frankie’s aunt (who has been revealed to be “Proteus,” a villain operating a drug smuggling ring), she comes to accepts her true intentions. And, Bianca and Maggie develop a clear friendship. Bianca is shown as still mourning Frankie, and Maggie is clearly rendered as heterosexual. In February 2002 Maggie confronts her Vanessa about Frankie’s murder and is almost murdered by her. Around this time, Erica, who has been put on trial for Frankie’s murder, is found not guilty.
All My Children acknowledged the online campaign. During summer 2002, Bianca and Maggie broke up (as friends) for a short time, shared a few platonic kisses, and acknowledged confused feelings. But, the program’s continuing refusal to confirm whether Bianca and Maggie were indeed a couple spurred increasing agitation and frustration among BAM Fans, who believed that they were being “strung along” – that the network was giving them only “scraps” and hoping that they would be satisfied. A December 2002 article in Soap Opera Digest illustrates that the sentiment was held by a mainstream publication, as well.

It seems that AMC’s hesitation to formally pair these two has actually upped their rooting value. While other recent duos spend more time baring their bodies than their souls, Maggie and Bianca have built their bond the old-fashioned way: through intimate talks and longing glances. If our mail is any indication, viewers are ready for Bianca to have more with her dearest pal than just an unrequited crush. (as cited in Warn, 2003c, para 6)
Allen’s (1985) insights are again helpful. He notes that soap viewers expect frustratingly slow and melodramatic courtship between couples. Indeed, that accounts for much of viewers’ pleasure engaging with storylines. But, soap viewers can also become disengaged and frustrated when romantic scenarios remain unrealized for too long. Even with the soap opera genre’s slow temporal register, the plot must move along fast enough for romantic pairings to be plausible and satisfying to viewers.

The agitation felt by BAM Fans was also evident in press commentary. In an early January 2003 issue, Michael Logan of *TV Guide* highlighted the reluctance to pair Bianca and Maggie in his year-end article on the “worst” moves made by soap writers. (See Figure 9.) Also, the December 31st issue of *Soap Opera Digest* selected Bianca and Maggie as the "Best Non-Couple" of the year. Reflecting on the storyline in May 2003, Mara Levinsky, associate editor of *Soap Opera Digest*, noted the implausibility of Bianca not having romantic relationships like other people her age: “If she had been a straight character, she would have been married and divorced by now” (as cited in Rosen, 2003, para 7).

*Period 2 (January – June 2003).* “The Battle for Bianca and Maggie on All My Children.” This is the title of an article posted in February 2003 on AfterEllen.com and authored by site founder, Sarah Warn. This was AfterEllen’s first article concerning Bianca. Warn begins her article by challenging the praise given to *AMC* by the media advocacy group, GLAAD. She noted that the program has, since the coming out storyline, been nominated for one of the group’s visibility awards. Warn found it surprising that GLAAD would offer an award for a program that has, in her view, gone out of its way to avoid depicting lesbian intimacy.
Figure 9. Michael Logan of TV Guide admonished All My Children writers for their unwillingness to pair up Bianca and Maggie.

At the beginning of 2003, Bianca is heartbroken over Maggie’s refusal of her feelings, though they are still friends. And, Maggie has grown close to Henry, a student at her university. Contrary to GLAAD’s seeming satisfaction with the progression of the storyline, Warn noted the existence of fans (BAM Fans) who were dissatisfied with what they saw as the program’s deliberate efforts to deemphasize Bianca’s and Maggie’s

\[\text{48} \] GLAAD Director of Communications John Sonego justified the direction of Bianca’s storyline by saying, "Many young, newly out lesbians fall for a close friend, only to discover the friend is straight." He added, “Unrequited love...and heartbreak are what keep the viewers tuning in - and learning" (Warn, 2003c, para 3).
relationship and were taking action. Warn provided a summary of the group’s recent activities:

In February, 2003, BAM stepped up their efforts through letters, videos, t-shirts and roses to All My Children, and it paid off with multiple mentions in the leading soap opera magazines. On February 4th, ABC Soaps in Depth included this blurb:

"BAM Fans lobby for Romance! Fans behind the BAM (Bianca and Maggie) campaign, which hopes to see the AMC pair become more than friends, are sending out catchy videos, 'Love is...BAM!' T-shirts, and white roses symbolic of the one Maggie once gave Bianca. 'We want the obvious: a romance between Bianca and Maggie," says the group.'

A February 2003 issue of Soap Opera Weekly mentioned BAM Fans, as well:

"BAM fans keep championing their favorite couple--Bianca and Maggie--even though the show is going ahead with plans to hook up Maggie with Henry. The fans have been inundating the soap (as well as Weekly) with t-shirts, videos, testimonials and other paraphernalia. But will they be victorious?" (as cited in Warn, 2003c, para 7-8)

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49 A letter to the editor of the national lesbian magazine Curve attests to this sentiment (Velasquez, 2003).
The *Soap Opera Weekly* article also featured BAM Fans’ success in securing the support of the two actors playing Bianca and Maggie. Eden Riegel (Bianca) told the magazine, "[BAM] sent me and Liz [Hendrickson] this big package with presents, hats and posters that say 'Absolute BAM.' All of them wrote us these wonderful notes about what the characters and the storyline means to them" (as cited in Warn, 2003c, para 11).

Warn (2003c, para 12) then cited AMC’s then head writer Gordon Rayfield’s acknowledgement of the BAM Fans campaign in the February issue of *Soap Opera Weekly* as evidence that the “message is getting through but the writers are predictably noncommittal.” Rayfield told the magazine, "We just take that [the BAM Fans campaign] as a commitment to our characters, and we're hoping to not disappoint them. But sometimes the fun is in waiting to see the scenes that you want to see and the relationships you want to see" (as cited in Warn, 2003c, para 12). Warn (2003c, para 13), then, surmises: “The question is how much longer Bianca and Maggie fans are willing to wait.”

Michael Logan of *TV Guide* encapsulated the dilemma facing ABC: "How much longer could they have a lesbian character who is young, who is attractive, who is really personable, and not give her a romance?" (as cited in Behrens, 2003, para 8). The action AMC took in March 2003 was to bring in a new character in her late 20s, Lena Kundera, as a new love interest for Bianca. Erica hired her to be the new Chief Financial Officer at Enchantment, Erica’s company where Bianca also worked.

In many ways, the network was continuing its “have it both ways” strategy of addressing fan desires while not fully satisfying them. This excerpt from *The Advocate*, offering the insiders’ views on why they brought in Lena, illustrates this approach:
There was wonderful chemistry with Bianca and Maggie,” acknowledges [Jean Daddario] Burke, AMC’s Executive Producer. But, [Brian] Frons [Head of ABC Daytime] says, rather than trust that momentum, “cowardly network people that we are, we did some research.” After polling 1,500 soap fans about Bianca's love life, the network found that many viewers wanted Bianca to have a romance — with someone else. (Behrens, 2003, para 6)

The network poll ABC conducted both ignored the many BAM fans who clearly wanted a relationship between Bianca and Maggie and suggested that another romantic relationship for Bianca would follow. In this same regard, the program’s rendering of Lena as bisexual also worked as a sort of “delay” tactic. In fact, Bianca was even unsure about the object of Lena’s affections early on; was it her or their co-worker, Boyd? Also, viewers soon learn that Lena is secretly working as a covert operative for another new character, Michael Cambias, who is trying to take over Enchantment, Erica’s company, and also obtain the formula for a secret, anti-aging formula Boyd has developed. Paid by Michael to “take our enemies to bed,” Lena first coolly seeks to seduce Boyd. When this does not procure the formula, Michael has her work on seducing Bianca.

These developments fueled fans’ concerns that Bianca was, yet again, going to be hurt. But, in early April, things quickly change, and Lena develops feelings for Bianca. She tells Michael that she won’t “hurt an innocent girl,” and she decides to leave the country. Bianca feels dejected when she learns about Lena’s imminent departure. After talking to old family friend Myrtle, Bianca runs to the airport and finds Lena just as she is ready to board the airplane. The lengthy and melodramatic scene culminates with an extended kiss. (See Figure 10.)
Bianca’s and Lena’s kiss received substantial press coverage as the first romantic same-sex kiss in U.S. daytime television history (Rosen, 2003). “Not red-hot,” but “better late than never,” observed Salon.com about the kiss, which it saw as satisfying, though chaste by soap standards (Havrilesky, 2003). Warn agreed, saying that the kiss “didn’t disappoint” (2003b, para 1). At the same time that the kiss was heralded, doubts continued to linger about whether and how the program would continue depicting Bianca’s love life. Also, the timing of the kiss, during “sweeps month,” engendered doubts about ABC’s motivation. Also, while Executive Producer Burke promised that Bianca and Lena would share an explicit love scene shortly after the kiss (“AMC Poised,” 2003; Behrens, 2003), what the program actually showed was decidedly more tentative. These scenes include the morning after an implied sexual encounter (even though Lena and Bianca are not shown in bed together) and another scene where the two are in a sauna, with towels on. All of this reinforces the view that producers were continuing to try to “have it both ways.” Push the
envelope a bit and, at the same time, garner extensive attention without giving lesbian fans what they most want.

Bianca’s happiness also turned out to be short-lived, as she then learned that Lena is working covertly for Michael to procure the anti-aging formula Boyd has developed and has further deceived Bianca by trying to steal the formula from Erica’s home safe. (The viewer knows that Michael has continued to threaten Lena’s mother and that she only begrudgingly agrees to help him with this last task.) Bianca sadly agrees to work with Erica and Kendall to seek vengeance on Michael and Lena. Not surprisingly, Bianca breaks up with Lena, who is also arrested. With Lena’s cooperation, as well as efforts by Kendall to get further evidence against Michael, the district attorney is able to solidify his case against Michael for engaging in corporate espionage and fraud and subsequently re-file criminal charges against him.

Period 3 (July – December 2003). “On July 8, Bianca will be raped,” begins a stunning post, published in June 2003, on AfterEllen (Warn, 2003d, emphasis removed). Warn then alerts her readers to rumors circulating on Internet television forums since early June that Bianca will be raped by Michael out of his anger at Erica. Warn acknowledges that Bianca is not being singled out here; Michael, she notes, has recently tried to rape Kendall and Erica. She also notes that rape is a common occurrence for female characters in soap operas.50

But, the use of rape in this case as particularly problematic to Warn (2003d). Since Bianca is the only lesbian character in daytime soap opera, inserting the character in a rape storyline reproduces the longstanding representational device of having the lesbian be a victim of sexual violence. That the rape happened right after Bianca and Lena reconciled furthers this assessment. Also supporting this view is the fact that Bianca, in comparison to

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50 All My Children’s role in channeling the rape narrative in daytime television has been well-studied (see Brooks, 1997; Dutta, 1999; Larson, 1991).
other characters, has barely had a love life. “Which means if the rape storyline happens as expected,” Warn (2003d, para 9) said, “it is sending the message that consensual, loving sex between women is too taboo and too controversial to show on daytime television, but forced, violent heterosexual sex is acceptable.”

Several persons affiliated with the program, from Eden Riegel (Bianca) to Megan McTavish, AMC’s new head writer, spoke to the soap press about the uproar. To a word, they denied that Bianca’s lesbianism motivated the storyline. One reason they proffered is that the Cambias story arc, overall -- with its depiction of Michael’s escalating rage, especially toward Erica -- seemed inherent in the story. In the July 22, 2004, issue of ABC Soaps in Depth, McTavish explained that “Bianca is raped not because of her sexual orientation, but because she is the beloved of all the people that Michael hates...She becomes, in a sense, the sacrificial lamb, because everyone loves her and because she is truly the most innocent of all those involved in this story” (as cited in Warn, 2003d, para 29). This was one reason given for the rape storyline. Another reason given is that the rape storyline could simultaneously bring Kendall (Erica’s other daughter) closer to Erica and touch on Erica’s history of rape.

The reference to Erica’s history of rape is to a 1994 storyline, created by Nixon, concerning the then-topical issue of “recovered memories” and which revealed that Erica had been raped by a friend of her father’s at the age of 14. The storyline fit into ongoing efforts to soften Erica from being an arch-villain to someone who is rendered more sympathetic. Whereas her loveless marriages and heartaches had once been considered “appropriate punishment,” they now endeared Erica to audiences as someone who had “suffered too much” (Butler, 1990). The desire to soften Erica motivated the decision to make Erica a mother in the late 1980s. Erica’s pregnancy, as well as Bianca’s near fatal illness
as a baby – she had Reye’s Syndrome – was intended by Nixon to make Erica more vulnerable and sympathetic (Williams, 1992).

The “recovered memories” rape storyline that came a few years later furthered this goal by recasting Erica’s problems with intimacy from being a sign of her selfishness to a sign of her childhood wounds. For Dutta (1999), it makes sense why writers avoided a present-day storyline involving Erica being raped as an adult. Soap opera conventions in the depiction of female rape – indeed, the routine use of rape in characterizing female experience – often reinforce patriarchal rape myths, such as the view that women “deserve” to be raped. And, they yield deeply ambivalent attitudes toward those who experience rape. In the early 1990s, the program was trying to recuperate Erica as a good mother. Introducing a present-day rape would have introduced doubt and blame and, thus, been counter to the writers’ goals in using rape to make Erica’s character more complex.

It makes sense, given the contradictory meanings of rape in soap opera, why Erica had not been inserted in rape storylines previously. Soap opera conventions reinforce the view that “troubled” (often sexually empowered) women are redeemed by the experience of rape: “They undergo complete personality changes, reforming not only their sexual behavior but all their ways. The larger community now accepts these women into its fold and redirects its antagonism toward the next villainess who inevitably appears” (Dutta, 1999, p. 37). Dutta added, “The redemptive nature of rape on All My Children explains why, for the first twenty years of the series, Erica Kane, the ultimate soap vixen, was never raped. The resultant

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51 Another likely factor motivating these storylines was Lucci’s expressed desire to win an Emmy, which had eluded her for over two decades (Gerston, 1993). Her character had often been involved in storylines considered far-fetched even by soap opera standards: “hunting Nazis in Bolivia, [being] tried for murder, posing as a nun, confronting a grizzly bear and [trying] to spring her lover from prison in a helicopter escape” (Gerston, 1993, p. A36). The gripping and highly melodramatic arc involving Erica’s pregnancy and maternal tribulations served as a counter to these “lightweight” storylines.
redemption would have made her a sympathetic figure and undercut her position as bitch goddess” (1999, p. 38).

With its introduction of Kendall Hart as Erica’s daughter from the childhood rape (who had been placed for adoption immediately after birth), the “recovered memories” storyline provided audiences with a new female villain to despise. Kendall came to Pine Valley to seek vengeance on Erica and, thus, took up the role of the female villain while Erica was working on becoming a better mother. These two tropes for female identity – the good mother and powerful villain are key, Modleski (1982) notes, for depicting female experience in soap operas. Over the years, Kendall, too, has been rehabilitated and made more complex.

The following quotes illustrate how program insiders viewed the 2003 storyline involving Bianca’s rape as continuing upon these earlier themes and character objectives:

Bianca's rape came out of our desire to deepen the relationship between Erica and her two daughters, to deepen Kendall and Bianca's relationship, and change the family dynamics among the Kane women. There was nothing about Bianca's sexual orientation that played a major role. We wanted to revisit Erica's rape. We wanted to use Kendall's history of being a child of that rape. – Brian Frons, Head of ABC Daytime (“The Real Reason,” 2003, p. 4)

I made my choice because Michael was an almost-rapist when I came to the show. They had already touched on Erica's history of rape and how that affected her, and it seemed to me that rather than be scared off by that, that's the natural place for all the characters to go. To me, it's a love story among these three women. That is as important as the other love stories on the show. How they work this out and how
they live through this, moment to moment...I find it very compelling drama. –

Megan McTavish, Head writer of *All My Children* (“The Real Reason,” 2003, p. 4)

As mentioned previously, Warn (2003d) criticized the rape storyline as being a justification for less emphasis on issues of lesbian sexuality. Indeed, in the aftermath of the rape, Bianca withdraws from Lena. She is also shown as being haunted at every turn by Michael in her imagination but also in real life. Moreover, the rape storyline provided an opportunity for writers to reemphasize Maggie’s role in Bianca’s life— as a caring friend whom Bianca turns to for support, and not as a romantic partner.\(^52\) In the months after the rape, viewers see few scenes of Lena and Bianca together, although producers try to keep the relationship going between the two by having Bianca tell Maggie that she still has feelings for Lena.

Lena’s increasingly diminished role in Bianca’s life frustrated many fans who believed that it would have made sense for Lena to have helped Bianca recover from her rape. At the same time, BAM fans, while still invested in the storyline, were left unsatisfied at the continual rebuffing of romantic possibilities between Bianca and Maggie. Warn commented on these sentiments in this October 2003 posting: “*All My Children* will continue to promise much and deliver little when it comes to its lesbian characters, hoping that lesbian viewers won’t be able to tell the difference between friendship and romance, or will be so grateful for

\(^{52}\) Additionally, the writers’ revisiting of Erica’s rape reinforced the earlier strategy, noted by Harrington (2003b), of focusing Bianca’s story around that of her mother to logically avoid dealing with issues of sexuality.
any lesbian storyline at all that they won't care that it's full of tragedy and relationships that
never go anywhere (para 19).”

Subsequent plot developments – in particular, Bianca’s discovery that she is pregnant from her rape – also perplexed Warn for two reasons. First, her pregnancy provided another way to (realistically) avoid depicting Bianca’s love life; and, stories focused first on Bianca’s attempts to hide her pregnancy, with the support of Maggie and her sister Kendall, from everyone, including her mother, and, then, on her deliberation over whether to have an abortion. Equally problematic to Warn, though, is that the “lesbian mother” trope is a “a favorite refuge for TV writers who both want to avoid dealing with the sexual aspects of lesbian relationships and who want to ‘normalize’ the lesbian characters--to show viewers that, at their core, lesbians are just like heterosexual women (who of course, all want to be mothers)...” (2003a, para 3). Others (Ciasullo, 2001; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Moritz, 1994; Torres, 1993) make similar arguments about lesbian depictions in television and popular culture more generally.

As mentioned previously, in the months after the rape, Lena hardly figured into Bianca’s life. Lisa Yimm (2004a), an AfterEllen contributor, criticized as “unsatisfying” a romantic kiss Lena and Bianca shared at a New Year’s Eve (2003) party. Yimm praised the handling of the scene (specifically, how Lena and Bianca are portrayed just like the heterosexual couples all around them), as well as the network’s decision not to call attention to the kiss with special advisory warnings or advance publicity. But, Yimm criticized the kiss on two grounds. First, she found it to be both hastily executed and out of line with the

53 In an unscientific, online poll conducted by AfterEllen, 89% of the 772 respondents viewed storylines after Bianca’s rape as being intended to avoid showing the character in a lesbian relationship (“AMC Avoiding,” 2003).
previous developments in the storyline. Yimm noted that viewers have hardly seen Bianca and Lena together in the several months preceding the kiss; their unexpected kiss at the New Year’s Eve party did not seem natural or satisfying. Second, Yimm (2004a, para 7) argued that the reason for the kiss is dubious, to “throw a bone” to lesbian fans, without promising anything more.

The increasing frustration voiced by AfterEllen writers resonates with Jenkins’s (1992) findings in his study of fans of the program Beauty and the Beast. Fans of the program waited patiently for the network to listen to them and respond to their urging that Vincent and Catherine be paired romantically. Time after time, fan sentiment was denied by program producers who wanted to focus on action instead of romance; the network was pursuing male viewers who they perceived to be more interested in action storylines. The intensity of fan sentiment escalated so much that the only way fans would be satisfied, Jenkins found, would be for Vincent and Catherine to consummate their relationship. When the network finally relented to fan wishes and had the couple kiss in the season three opener, fans actually found the kiss unsatisfying because it was clear that the network was doing it only because fans were angry, and not because the network thought this was an essential part of the story. Thus, the kiss seemed inauthentic. Jenkins (1992, p. 145) summarized fan reactions:

[Beauty and the Beast fans’] intense displeasure in the third season fed upon several years of disappointment in the series’ refusal to gratify their romantic fantasies, a history of TV Guide blurbs promising romantic interludes which proved more teasing than gratifying, and scenes that edge toward romantic commitment, only to be interrupted or to have the characters back away from consummation. If, for many fans, the cryptic and hurried consummation in ‘Through Lovers Be Lost…,’ the third
season opener...was a ‘ludicrous nightmare,’ denying viewers the desired warmth and intimacy, that moment was simply the last in a series of ‘insults’ to their hopes and expectations.

**Period 4 (January – March 2004).** Subsequent story developments also seemed inauthentic to fans. This period was highlighted by the decision of the writers to make Maggie start to question her sexuality again and draw closer to Bianca. For example, in a February 2004 episode, a conflicted Maggie kisses Bianca, even though Bianca is still involved with Lena. Producers were making an attempt to render a “love triangle,” involving Lena, Bianca, and Maggie. Triangles are commonly used in soap opera storytelling and are considered pleasurable to many viewers because they sustain romantic possibilities and heightened melodrama for a lengthier period (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). But, to be successful, there must be romantic fulfillment from time to time.

Yet, the nature of Bianca’s and Lena’s scenes together appear no different, Warn (2004) noted, than when the two were just friends. And, Maggie is shown simultaneously pining for Bianca and hanging out with a potential boyfriend. Also, during this period, Bianca is consumed with her pregnancy. Warn (2004, para 9) concluded, “[I]t’s hard to come up with a more boring and drawn-out love triangle on *All My Children* in recent history – which makes it almost impossible to avoid concluding that the triangle is just another stall tactic to let *All My Children* avoid putting Bianca in a romantic situation.” Adding to these criticisms of the triangle plotline is the program’s demonstrated reluctance to show lesbian sexual behavior. A triangle seemed inauthentic because few believed that the program would ever commit to realizing any of the romantic possibilities provided by the triangle in terms comparable to how heterosexual relationships were narrated.
Thus, by early 2004, lesbian fans and critics had gotten increasingly agitated with the Bianca storyline on *AMC*. In her study of the online discussions of other disgruntled soap opera fans, Baym (2000) found that, over time, fan postings moved from “semantic criticism” (i.e., being focused on analyzing and commenting on the plot, performances, and execution) to “pragmatic criticism” (e.g., analyzing whether the show was still worth watching). Warn (2004, para) illustrates this turn toward pragmatic criticism:

> [It] seems obvious that *All My Children* is not ready to fully support lesbian relationships on the show, and in fact, may not be ready any time soon. Despite having led viewers on for months, even years, with the promise of a real relationship for Bianca while milking it for all the PR value they can get, *All My Children* has left no plot twist unturned--including increasingly incredulous storylines involving rape, pregnancy, and suicide attempts--in their quest to distract viewers from noticing that they've never delivered on that promise.

The fans Baym (2000) studied increasingly took to criticizing writers in their online postings to vent their frustration. They also believed that writers might be following the postings. Harrington and Bielby (1995) have found similar moves by disgruntled fans. These frustrated soap opera fans could turn to other storylines for enjoyment (Baym, 2000), though.

*AMC* fans criticized head writer McTavish, in particular, for her history of using sexual violence in her writing, and also for her penchant for plotlines they considered outlandish and less character driven than they would have liked. (See, for example, an angry
Theoretically, with Lena gone there should be no more obstacles to Maggie and Bianca's relationship, except the biggest obstacle of all: the writers' demonstrated reluctance to create fully-realized lesbian characters and relationships. The character of Maggie has languished on *All My Children* in the last several months, with mostly supporting storylines; if the rumors of her upcoming heterosexual relationship are true, perhaps the writers felt that giving Maggie a boyfriend will be the best way to give her character more attention while avoiding the controversial aspects of finally developing a romantic relationship between Maggie and Bianca.

Warn was referring to the upcoming departure of Lena that April when the character left for Europe to take care of her ailing mother. Bianca and Lena swore they would stay committed to one another. The actor decided not to renew her contract with the program, in part because of the lack of storylines featuring her character.\(^{54}\)

Period 5 (April 2004 – February 2005). Not surprisingly, things did not improve after Lena left. In mid-summer 2004, a declaration of love by Maggie “brought another ray of hope, soon dashed by Bianca’s insistence that although she loves Maggie, she was still in love with Lena” (Yimm, 2004b, para 3). The program “continued” Bianca’s relationship with

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\(^{54}\) After leaving the program, Sosnovska (Lena) spoke to SoapNet and offered her assessment as to why Lena lingered for months after Bianca’s rape (when it was clear that the writers were not interested in developing her character): “I really think it was the force of the fans, their writing in that really saved my character. Because I can’t see how they [the writers] expected to keep me on at that point. And then they felt kind of obliged to” (as cited in Torchin, 2004, para 18).
Lena for several months by showing Bianca on the phone with Lena; at the same time, it characterized Maggie as having unclear feelings and sometimes feeling jealous of Lena.

Moreover, Bianca became consumed in a major story arc called the “baby switch” that further drew the character’s focus away from her love life. (See Figure 11.) This protracted story arc, which began in Spring 2004, involved the kidnapping of Bianca’s baby, Miranda, by evil J. R. Chandler. He convinces everyone that Miranda had died and that Bianca -- who believes that her new friend Bess’s baby, Babe, is actually her own – is mentally ill. Bianca subsequently, for months on end, works to get her baby back.

The title of Yimm’s AfterEllen article, published in late December 2004, was, “Is All My Children’s Bianca Still a Lesbian?” (At the time that Yimm wrote the article, Bianca was in a coma.) This article’s status as the second to last article AfterEllen published on Bianca during the time period illustrates how irrelevant the storyline had become to lesbian viewers.

Figure 11. The “baby switch” story arc, as covered by ABC Soaps in Depth in September 2004.
In her December 2004 article, Yimm had pointed criticism for McTavish who, she felt, continued to “lead viewers on” that “more is soon to come.” Yimm mentioned an upcoming article in *ABC Soaps in Depth* where McTavish said that “Bianca finds herself falling in love – or at least having feelings that feel like love – for Maggie” and, then, says, “whether it means they end up together is a big question and a big part of the story” (as cited in Yimm, 2004b, para 4). As Yimm noted, Lena had broken up with Bianca earlier in the fall, but the network still continued to avoid pairing up Bianca and Maggie. Instead, Maggie was characterized as “waffling” in her romantic attraction to Bianca; she had taken up with a new boyfriend, Jonathan, but still continued to give “mixed signals” to Bianca. Jonathan soon was revealed to be abusive, and Bianca urged Maggie to get out of the relationship.

Less than two months later, in late February 2005, after the culmination of the “baby switch” arc and its reuniting of Bianca and Miranda, Bianca finally made her exit from Pine Valley. Leaving together with Miranda and headed to Paris, Maggie and Bianca do end up together – Bianca has finally convinced Maggie to leave abusive Jonathan – but, it is clearly a platonic relationship.

**Commentary on Bianca’s significance**

In their commentary on Bianca’s departure, and her character’s overall significance, *AMC* was at odds with the lesbian fans and critics studied in this chapter. "The baby story has got to be up in the top five (story lines) over the 35 years," executive producer Julie Hanan Carruthers told the Associated Press. "You can't go anywhere in the country and say you're associated with the show without someone asking, 'When is she getting the baby back?"' ("All My Children," 2004, para 7). "If a character is nice to Bianca, the audience tends to like that character, and if he is mean to Bianca the audience knows he's a bad guy," head writer McTavish told reporters. “It's stunning. The lesbian girl became the moral tent
pole of our show” (Healy, 2005, p. E3). Brian Frons, Head of ABC Daytime, hailed Bianca as an unequivocal success: “To have someone like Bianca who is openly gay, a mother, proud of who she is, who has fallen in love with another woman, who is taking heroic action -- to have the audience embrace this character fully is pretty incredible. The audience went from ‘I don't want to see a lesbian relationship’ to saying, ‘Bianca should be in love’” (Healy, 2005, p. E3).

But, other commentators, including those affiliated with the soap press, criticized the storyline as a missed opportunity. Mimi Torchin, the founding editor-in-chief of Soap Opera Weekly, offered this assessment: “It was a beautiful and historic love story. It was accepted across the board. Lena and Bianca were beloved by the fans, kept winning popularity polls, and had a poster in Soap Opera Weekly for being the fans' favorite couple...Then Bianca was raped and for all intents and purposes, that was the end of it” (2004, paras 13, 15) In the last AfterEllen article on the storyline, Warn (2005, para 5) noted that, while the network “pushed the envelope in a number of ways regarding lesbian visibility,” it also “played it very safe--or worse” subjecting Bianca, as the only major lesbian character in daytime television, to rape while never fully rendering her love life. Furthermore, for lesbian viewers, the ending is ambivalent: “Seeing Maggie and Bianca ride off into the sunset together is somewhat satisfying for viewers who've waited patiently for three years for this relationship to develop. But it's also bittersweet, because it's only happening as the characters are on their way out, and because it's not totally clear that they actually are together” (Warn, 2005, para 10). Warn concluded her article unsure whether U.S. daytime soap operas would ever feature a significant lesbian character like Bianca again.
Scardaville’s (1999) study of online fans who launched an ultimately unsuccessful 10-year campaign to save the struggling NBC soap opera *Another World* (*AW*) from cancellation helps us better understand the efforts of BAM Fans and AfterEllen in trying to shape the Bianca storyline. Launched in 1993 when a local affiliate in Washington state pulled the show, the campaign grew into a national organization that used the Web to gather and distribute information. It also engaged in offline activities similar to those engaged in by BAM Fans (e.g., alternately boycotting or supporting products made by Proctor & Gamble, the soap’s sponsor; having petition drives; wearing ribbons; calling NBC; and speaking to the press). The focus of initial campaign activism revolved around trying to make *AW* a “better program” and trying to encourage the network to renew the program; after the program was cancelled in 1999, fan activists, at first, focused their efforts on trying to help *AW* actors find work in other daytime soaps. Later, they took on more of an advocacy role in trying to promote the viability of daytime television.

*AW* fan-activists viewed their activism as having prolonged the life of the soap, according to Scardaville (1999). They also believed that their efforts generated interest in the genre overall and helped to sustain other soap operas. Yet, fans increasingly became disillusioned with their efforts, and, by 2002, the group had disbanded. As longtime viewers, they felt more knowledgeable about the program than most of its current crop of writers. Thus, they grew frustrated when the network did not take seriously their suggestions about how to “fix” the program. Had that been done, they felt, the show’s ratings might have improved, saving the show from its eventual cancellation. Ultimately, fan-activists came to

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55 The campaign Scardaville (1999) studied was actually a series of targeted campaigns, usually not overlapping, with an evolving leadership.
view the network as being committed to *All*’s cancellation. This view was underpinned by their knowledge that the network wanted to move away from shows produced by sponsors such as Proctor & Gamble to reduce costs and tighten its control over programming.

Like the fans Scardaville (1999) studied, the lesbian fans of *AMC* became skeptical of ABC Daytime’s commitment to Bianca. This became clearer to them as the storyline progressed, and the initial hopes they had yielded to frustration and disappointment. (See Figure 12 for a timeline plotting key developments in the storyline and lesbian viewer interest.) Fans increasingly felt taken for granted, believing that the network relied on their being complicit and accepting subtle cues in place of fully-realized romantic scenarios, which, fans believed, were indeed possible. They viewed as unnecessary and, indeed, traumatic the apparent network strategy of making Bianca suffer in order to be accepted.

The myriad plot developments involving Bianca between 2002-2005 led BAM Fans and AfterEllen critics to question the motives of the writers, producers, and network executives affiliated with *AMC*. Were they trying to box the character into a corner? To make her less viable? The anger of lesbian fans and critics increased when the network also subsequently framed Bianca, and its overall efforts around having a lesbian character, as successful. Fans could not help but see *AMC* as highly ambivalent. Like the *All* fans studied by Scardaville, they concluded that the program had actually made Bianca unviable through its choices. Among mainstream audiences, too, the character was popular, and there seemed to be support for her to have a relationship. But, *AMC* never committed to writing a satisfactory love story involving the character. Over time, fans and critics became less and less interested in the program. When Bianca was finally written out in February 2005, those who still followed the storyline accepted the move, as it was clear to them that the network saw no other possibilities for the character.
Figure 12. A timeline showing the trajectory of lesbian viewers’ engagement with the Bianca post-coming out storyline during major plot developments.

Note. Lesbian viewers = BAM Fans and AfterEllen. “Lesbian Viewer Interest” was assessed qualitatively by considering each group’s written communications (e.g., the number and tone of postings or articles on its website) and how each group’s attitudes were characterized in the soap press.
CHAPTER 4

The “gay comfort level:”

Examining a media advocacy group’s efforts to combat youth homophobia

In fall 2001, the cable channel MTV released a series of Public Service Announcements, called “Snaps,” as part of its year-long pro-social marketing campaign, “Fight for Your Rights: Take a Stand Against Discrimination.” MTV developed the PSAs in partnership with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). The broader “Discrimination” campaign originated in early January 2001, when the network ran a telefilm, Anatomy of a Hate Crime, based on the award-winning play of the same name, that explored the causes of Matthew Shepard’s death. The channel then “went black” for 17 hours while a continuous scroll listed the names of other persons whose deaths were attributed to hate crimes.

“Discrimination” confronted viewers with a number of issues and areas of intolerance. The call to action was to get young people to “delete discrimination” in themselves and others. Homophobia was only one of the overlapping oppressions that were targeted, but it seemed to be a focal point, as shown by the highlighting of Shepard’s murder. After Anatomy, MTV cablecast a range of related programming, including special features, news, and PSAs; it also worked with partner groups such as GLSEN and Southern Poverty Law Center on community outreach efforts. It decided to introduce the “Snaps” PSAs, which were designed to effect an immediate change in consciousness, after polling revealed that youth viewers were “still not getting the message.”
The Truth About Jane and the story of Bianca’s coming out to her mother Erica on All My Children both directed the viewer’s attention to the problems gay youth faced within their families. They both appeared within a climate, shortly after Shepard’s murder, where there was a sense of urgency in helping families be a more positive developmental context for gay youth. The “Snaps” intervention, and MTV’s anti-discrimination campaign overall, reflects the coinciding attention paid in the late 1990s and early 2000s to the problem of youth homophobia, especially in the classroom, as something making the lives of gay youth more difficult.

The 2001 Hamilton College Gay Issues Poll, a national poll of graduating high school seniors that was co-released by MTV, found that 9 out of 10 students reported that gay epithets were used in their schools to describe students who were not liked; half had heard classmates insult gay students by calling them “faggot,” “homo,” or “dyke” (“Hamilton College,” 2001). A school climate survey, conducted by GLSEN, found that homophobic hostility – verbal and sexual harassment and physical assault – was prevalent in elementary and high schools, and it was perpetrated both by peers and educators (2002). A 2001 report by Human Rights Watch also documented widespread discrimination and physical violence against LGBT students in U.S. schools.

The present chapter examines an intervention that, like “Snaps,” sought to redress youth homophobia: a report published by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD) and released in January 2003 called, “How Youth Media Can Help Combat Homophobia Among American Teenagers.” The report was authored by Rodger Streitmatter, a professor of Communications at American University in Washington, D.C., who studies the gay and lesbian press. It was funded through GLAAD’s Center for the Study of Media and Society, which supports research judged both academically sound and
pragmatically minded, that is, research that GLAAD can use in its outreach to the media industries.

Streitmatter (2003) administered questionnaires to first-year students at his university (n=200) in four different groups during the fall of 2002. Questionnaires assessed students’ attitudes toward gay youth depicted in popular magazines and television programs targeted to young people. Streitmatter met with respondents in three sessions, with the first session involving data collection for the magazine sample, the second involving data collection for Dawson’s Creek and Buffy the Vampire, and the third involving data collection for The Real World Chicago. His magazine sample included the publications Seventeen, Teen People, and YM. He also conducted focus groups with a small group of respondents after the administration of the survey to follow up on specific findings.

GLAAD also worked behind the scenes with the makers of The Truth About Jane and All My Children during the writing and development of both narratives, and funded Harrington’s (2001) initial work on the Bianca coming out story arc on All My Children.\(^{56}\) This chapter concerns GLAAD’s efforts to influence media makers in a different and more comprehensive way: through funding research that studied how youth audiences responded to gay youth portrayals. The organization sponsored Streitmatter’s research to provide data for its ongoing consultations with media organizations.

Underpinning Streitmatter’s (2003) rationale for the study is his belief that youth media are powerful in the lives of young people. A program such as The Real World, he argued, can be enormously effective in changing youth attitudes. He also noted others’ support of the program, such as a clinical psychologist named Lisa Wolf, who hailed it for

\(^{56}\) Harrington’s report for GLAAD generated two journal articles on All My Children (Harrington, 2003a, 2003b) discussed in Chapter 3.
putting gay and straight youth in contact with one another. In the report’s introduction, Streitmatter cited studies done in “edutainment” and social learning frameworks to support this view. He also drew from his years as a classroom teacher, as well as “conventional wisdom,” to argue that if young people like who they are watching, if they find them physically attractive, they will be more likely to be comfortable seeing or reading about them, and that youth media will be more effective in countering stereotypes.

The model that underpins Streitmatter’s work is that youth homophobia can be lessened by making (straight) youth “comfortable” with reading about and watching gay youth. Hence, his research focused on studying youth attitudes toward media portrayals of gay youth to find out what specific criteria make them most comfortable. The report’s aim was to aid GLAAD’s work by “identifying the specific techniques and characteristics that young readers and viewers find most effective in increasing their comfort level vis-à-vis gay people” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 8).

As an effort to use mass media to confront a vexing problem in the lives of gay youth, Streitmatter’s (2003) study is well-intentioned. But, as with Rose’s similarly intentioned telefilm The Truth About Jane, his study is problematic as an effort to redress stigma. Rose wanted to reach Lifetime mothers by making them feel heroic and good. But, as I argued in Chapter 2, her strategy never challenged these mothers on their heteronormative understandings of what was normal and expected. Streitmatter’s strategy of working within pre-existing terms of acceptance is similarly problematic in that it challenges neither audience members nor media makers to move past their “gay comfort level” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 8). I also discuss how Streitmatter’s study, and GLAAD’s work overall, is embedded in the TV industry apparatus. The last part of the chapter offers an alternative
approach, critical media literacy, which I believe can work in a more progressive way to challenge youth homophobia.

Critique of Streitmatter’s approach

Below is an excerpt from Streitmatter’s (2003) study. It is from one of two focus group sessions that Streitmatter conducted with respondents (n=10) after findings from his survey research showed that respondents were more comfortable than he expected with scenes of gay intimacy on The Real World and the other TV programs he included. Streitmatter had hypothesized that young people were “comfortable with dialogue about being gay and with limited physical contact between gay persons, but those viewers become uncomfortable when gay characters (or real gay persons, in the case of The Real World) are shown having intimate physical contact with each other” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 55). His findings, though, led him to reject this hypothesis. Although respondents were a bit less comfortable with scenes of intimacy (e.g., Chris from The Real World Chicago “spooning” shirtless with Kurt on his bed or kissing and cuddling with him otherwise) than with scenes involving cast members discussing homosexuality, holding hands or hugging in a less romantic way, the majority were still comfortable seeing scenes of gay intimacy. In the focus groups, he sought an explanation:

Why are people your age so comfortable with gay content? The prevailing response, in both sessions, was: The Real World. One young man said: “I’ve been watching The Real World since I was twelve or thirteen. Almost every season there’s at least one gay guy or girl, and they almost always hook up with somebody. It’s part of the show.” A second boy said: “The first time I saw two guys on Real World kissing, I freaked. I got all sick to my stomach and stuff. But after a couple seasons, you get used to it. Now
it’s no big deal.” One young woman said: “I still think it’s kind of gross, and I can’t see myself kissing and cuddling with another girl. But I’ve seen it so much on *Real World* that it definitely doesn’t shock me anymore.” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 56)

Another excerpt (below) is the concluding paragraph of Streitmatter’s (2003) study. Streitmatter labeled his findings “successful” and “surprising.” He concluded, first, that youth media have had an impact on making youth comfortable with gay rights and watching scenes of intimacy between gay people. He also concluded that youth are not uncomfortable with talking about gay issues or intimacy.

The consistent level of comfort that young television viewers feel toward gay content may be the most reassuring of all the findings. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to state definitively what has caused these young people to be comfortable with gay content to the point of two men kissing while lying in bed together, it nevertheless seems reasonable to suggest, considering the comments by focus-group members, that one of the factors that has helped in this process is the gay content and images that have repeatedly been featured on *The Real World*. In short: Youth media have impact. (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 64)

Streitmatter’s findings and conclusions about young people’s support for gay rights are problematic in a number of ways. His first hypothesis regarding television programs is that, “Today’s young television viewers are generally supportive of gay and lesbian rights. They do not consider homosexuality to be morally wrong but see it as a fully acceptable way of life. They believe that gay people should be allowed to live openly and without fear of
prejudice or mistreatment” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 51). Two of the three criteria used to test this hypothesis concerned viewers’ attitudes toward Theo, a straight male who is characterized as having an intense double standard when it comes to gay men and lesbians.\textsuperscript{57} Theo thinks that gay men are “nasty,” while he thinks that lesbians are “sexy.” Findings that showed that most respondents disapproved of Theo led Streitmatter to conclude that young people are supportive of gay rights. (Seventy-nine percent of respondents viewed Theo as being “wrong” when he said that sending another man flowers is “definitely a little too gay for me,” and 87\% viewed him as being wrong when he said “being gay is a sin.”)

The belief, which Streitmatter hopes his audience has, that young people believe that their gay peers “should be allowed to live openly,” remains untested, however. And, it is not rejected despite the focus group discussion that quite clearly revealed participants’ discomfort with scenes of gay intimacy that are no different than those of the much more frequent heterosexual trysts featured on the program. Streitmatter’s (2003) expression of surprise that students are comfortable “even” with seeing more intimate scenes of gay male sexuality reflects his acceptance of heteronormativity.

Streitmatter’s third and fifth hypotheses and findings deserve similar scrutiny. The criterion used to test each hypothesis encompasses the correlation between respondents’ attitudes toward Chris and how much they liked him. Below are Streitmatter’s descriptions of these items:

\textsuperscript{57} The other criterion concerned a scene from \textit{Dawson’s Creek} where one of the characters, Jack, was discriminated against because he is gay.
Television Hypothesis 3: Young television viewers are more comfortable with a gay or lesbian character (or real gay person, in the case of “The Real World”) if those viewers perceive that person as having struggled to accept his or her sexuality.

This hypothesis would be supported if a high percentage of respondents felt sympathetic toward Chris—who stated very directly in the clip that he had struggled to accept his homosexuality—and then a high percentage of respondents liked him.

This hypothesis was supported.

94 percent of the respondents indicated that they felt sympathetic toward Chris, and the respondents also rated Chris the highest of any of the six gay people depicted in the TV clips on the “how much I like this person” scale.

(Streitmatter, 2003, p. 54)

Television Hypothesis 5: Young viewers are more comfortable with a gay man or a lesbian on TV if those viewers find him or her to be a person of character—with integrity and strong moral values.

This hypothesis would be supported if a high percentage of respondents felt that Chris on “The Real World” is a person of character and integrity (in the first clip, because Chris openly acknowledges that he is a recovering alcoholic and, in the second clip, because Chris tells Kurt—honestly and up front—that he wants “to go slowly” in their relationship rather than allowing Kurt to think the relationship is advancing rapidly, as he would like it to be) and then that a high percentage of respondents liked Chris.

This hypothesis was supported.
83 percent of the respondents indicated that Chris showed himself to be a person of character and integrity for acknowledging that he was a recovering alcoholic, and 79 percent of the respondents indicated that Chris showed himself to be a person of character and integrity by telling Kurt that he wanted “to go slowly” in their relationship. The respondents also rated Chris the highest of any of the six gay people depicted in the TV clips on the “how much I like this person” scale. (Streitmatter, 2003, 57)

Based on these findings, Streitmatter subsequently concluded that “the type of young gay or lesbian person depicted on the small screen who is the most successful in making teenage viewers more comfortable with homosexuality is a person who has struggled to accept his or her sexuality as well as being a person with integrity and strong moral values” (2003, p. 60, emphasis removed). This statement constitutes the most significant finding from his television study. In his view, it encapsulates the type of gay youth portrayal that GLAAD should encourage the television industry to make.

The correspondence between Streitmatter’s (2003) hypotheses, findings, and conclusions are given context when we consider how his report and GLAAD’s overall project are embedded in a politics of assimilation. As Vaid (1995) noted, an assimilationist philosophy (as opposed to one promoting liberation or transformation) has undergirded the visibility efforts of mainstream gay rights organizations for more than two decades. This tactic makes sense in the context of the large-scale assault on queer visibility and sexuality, in general, since the early 1980s (see Berlant & Warner, 1998). But, as Bell and Binnie (2000, p. 4) observed, “the outcome of rights claims, then, is to secure private space to be a sexual citizen.” They added, “while this might involve an intervention into the public sphere -- this
is merely a tactic to enable the claim to privacy – the ‘proper home of the sexual citizen.’\textsuperscript{58} Although the gay and lesbian rights movement has achieved rights, this effort has come at a cost: homosexuality has mostly been deemphasized and made private, in exchange for (always tenuous) forms of public visibility. Hence, it makes sense that Streitmatter (2003) would promote Chris, who struggles to accept his sexuality, for he is the archetype of the “good gay citizen” (Bell & Binnie, 2000, p. 30).

Unfortunately, this philosophy also leads Streitmatter to effectively “sell out” Aneesa, who has no problems accepting herself and has long been out. Under Bell and Binnie’s (2000, p. 33) framework, she might be viewed as a sexual “dissident.” Interesting to Streitmatter is that, while respondents rated Aneesa very highly on physical attractiveness – the highest among the three lesbians featured – they apparently did not like her. Among the six major characters and cast members shown in his sample clips, Aneesa is liked the least (no percentage provided) while Chris is liked the most (94% of respondents like him). This finding led to the rejection of his second hypothesis.

Trying to understand why there was no correlation between the two measures (respondents’ ratings of cast members’ physical attractiveness and likability), Streitmatter (2003) turned to items on his survey questionnaire to find an explanation. He attributed Aneesa’s unlikability to respondents not finding “acceptable” several of her behaviors: 85% did not find it acceptable, for example, that Aneesa walked around the apartment naked, often in front of male housemates; likewise, 83% found it unacceptable that she tried on dresses in the living room in front of her male housemates; and, lastly, 91% found it

\textsuperscript{58} Bell and Binnie (2000, pp. 2-3) also commented on the concessions involved with gay rights groups’ efforts to secure rights using a politics of assimilation: “the twinning of rights with responsibilities in the logic of citizenship is another way of expressing compromise – \textit{we} will grant you certain rights if (and only if) you match these by taking on certain responsibilities.”
unacceptable that she went into the shower naked while Theo was there and then criticized him for making her uncomfortable and ‘taking it a little too far’” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 53). Streitmatter (2003) used these findings not only to explain why he rejected Hypothesis 2 but to offer implicit evidence as to why GLAAD should promote gay youth portrayals like Chris. Streitmatter (2003) attributed Chris’s likability to respondents’ assessment of his moral behavior.

*Figure 13.* Aneesa changes clothes in a public area of the loft on *The Real World.*

Another approach: Critical media literacy

Streitmatter’s study is a missed opportunity in that it works to confirm students’ assumptions and does not interrogate them. The excerpt from the focus group mentioned

59 In his ethnographic study of tabloid talk show audiences and participants, Gamson (1998) found that audiences were more receptive to LGBT talk show participants when they were seen as being fully honest (i.e., did not hold back in revealing their essential “truths”) and when their identity fit binary categories (i.e., lesbian or gay man, and not bisexual or transgendered). Chris concurs with Gamson’s findings, in terms of the type of gay person audiences liked, because he ultimately (by episode three) reveals his sexual identity. He is seen as more transparent than Aneesa, who is perceived as being unclear as to whether she is lesbian or bisexual. Viewers perceived her as “leading Theo on.”
above is a good illustration of this shortcoming: Streitmatter does not push students on their obvious intolerance for scenes of gay intimacy. He accepts students’ views uncritically, which, as discussed previously, can be attributed to his assimilationist philosophy.

In their evaluation of efforts to promote media literacy, Semali and Hammett (1999) review a similar scenario: that of a teacher who wants to address social issues (here, encourage students to think more critically) but ultimately reinforces students’ currently accepted biases. The following example is from an educational textbook that was marketed as a media literacy resource. The example concerns a high school class’s response to the film *Citizen Kane*.

Toward the end of the film, Kane’s second wife complains shrilly that he never takes her anywhere. Kane walks suddenly toward her, his shadow obscuring her upturned face. At this point in the AP class, one of the boys shouted out, “Slap her!” When the segment ended Alan [Teasley, the teacher] turned to the class and said, “Obviously something in this scene impressed you, Joe.” “Yeah, she was whining. I couldn’t stand it. I wanted her to shut up.” The girls in the class couldn’t let that pass. One of them spoke up. “Yeah, that’s just like a man! He was abusing her! It’s not her fault he has imprisoned her in that mansion!” Joe wasn’t fazed. “I still say she was asking for it!” Suddenly the regular classroom teacher was out of her seat, pointing her finger at Joe. “Yeah, and you’re the one who kept insisting Hester Prynne was a whore!” Clearly these viewers are empowered to make their own judgements. To restore order, Alan asked, “So tell me folks, what in the cinematography or dialogue made you have such different reactions?” (as cited on p. 369)

This approach is problematic to Semali and Hammett (1999). Although teachers “engage in the debate and encourage such ‘personal’ response,” they do not challenge students’ endorsement of physical abuse (or their overall view on women’s roles). “Incorporating a critical stance with viewer response,” Semali and Hammett (1999, pp. 369-370) argued, “would mean intervening to discuss how a variety of texts, including this one, construct our notions of gender and power and how the text positions us in relation to characters so that we are likely to describe her as ‘complain[ing] shrilly’ and ‘whining.’”
In contrast to these types of media education approaches, as well as others that often focus only on helping students achieve a better understanding of media texts, Semali and Hammett (1999) advocate critical media literacy efforts focused on students (and teachers) developing skills in interpreting and contextualizing media content. They also view a commitment to social justice -- for example, an explicit desire to end forms of gender subordination -- as foundational. A core belief of critical media literacy, according to these authors, is that media representations (and, more broadly, the construction of knowledge in a society) are embedded in a society’s power relations and, thus, cannot be devoid of ideology. Thus, part of the educational process includes “figure[ing] out the underlying meanings embedded in the cultural, ideological, and political statements of the text” (Semali & Hammett, 1999, p. 376). At the same time, the process provides students and teachers with a “critical moment” to acknowledge their own subjectivity and to “question the values, attitudes, and the prior knowledge [they] bring into the ‘text’” (Semali & Hammett, 1999, p. 376).

I introduce the topic of critical media literacy because I wonder what it would have looked like had Streitmatter tried to challenge his students on their beliefs. What I do below

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Kellner and Share (2005, p. 372) provide an overview of how critical media literacy differs from other forms of media education: “Within educational circles, however, a debate persists over what constitutes the field of media pedagogy, with different agendas and programmes. A traditionalist “protectionist” approach would attempt to “inoculate” young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for book literacy, high culture, and the values of truth and beauty, and by denigrating all forms of media and computer culture (see Postman, 1985, 1992). A ‘media literacy’ movement, in contrast, attempts to teach students to read, analyse, and decode media texts in a fashion parallel to the advancement of print literacy. Media arts education, in turn, teaches students to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of media and to use various media technologies as instruments of self-expression and creation. Critical media literacy builds on these approaches, analysing media culture as products of social production and struggle and teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism.”
is pose some questions that could form the basis for a critical media literacy intervention using *The Real World Chicago*. First, though, I include Streitmatter’s summaries of *The Real World Chicago* clips he showed respondents. These summaries include his titles.

**Clips from The Real World Chicago**

**Coming Out**

- In the first of the half dozen scenes, the seven housemates are sitting together in a Jacuzzi getting to know each other by talking about themselves. The clip focuses primarily on Chris, a gay man, and Aneesa, a lesbian. The other housemates, who all appear in the clip at least briefly, are Theo, Kyle, Cara, Keri, and Tonya. An eighth person who appears in the clip is Kurt, a guy Chris is beginning to date. The initial scene in the Jacuzzi is followed by various other scenes such as Aneesa and Kyle in the bathroom, Aneesa and Theo in the shower together, Aneesa and Chris going out dancing, and Chris and Kyle walking and talking together.

- The clip includes both Aneesa and Chris coming out to their housemates, but in very different ways. Aneesa announces in the first scene that she is a lesbian; Chris does not mention his sexuality during that first scene, although he does mention that he is a recovering alcoholic, but gradually comes out to his housemates—first Aneesa, then Kyle, and then the others. In one scene before Chris has come out to anyone except Aneesa, Theo is shown unpacking while stating that he thinks male homosexuality is “disgusting” at the same time that Chris is shown overhearing the statement while he is unpacking in an adjoining room. Other scenes show Aneesa walking around the apartment naked, including in front of her male housemates, as well as Aneesa going naked into the shower where Theo, who has already expressed that he has sexual feelings for her, is showering.

- In the final scene of the clip, Chris brings Kurt to the apartment after a date; Chris introduces Kurt to his housemates, and the two young men exchange an affectionate hug on the street as they say goodbye. (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 26)

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61 This clip drew from several early episodes of the season.
Defining Your Comfort Level.

- In this clip, the focus is again on Chris and Aneesa, although Theo and Kurt also play significant roles. The other housemates appear in this clip as well. The opening scene shows Chris and Kurt on the beach (Lake Michigan) where Chris is working as a lifeguard; at the end of the scene, the two young men kiss each other goodbye.

- Some of the later scenes involve a dinner sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign, an organization that seeks to secure equal rights for gay people. When Chris asks the other housemates to go with him and Aneesa to the event, everyone accept Theo agrees to go; Theo is shown talking to his father, who is a minister, on the telephone and then stating that “being gay is a sin.”

- One scene shows Aneesa trying on dresses in front of her fellow housemates, and other scenes show Chris being honest with Kurt and saying that he “wants to go slowly” in their relationship.

- Scenes toward the end of the clip show the housemates at the dinner—including their reactions when a male drag queen appears on stage—and then at the apartment after the dinner. One scene shows Chris and Kurt kissing while they are lying on a bed together and then “spooning” while they are lying shirtless on the bed.

- The final scene in the clip shows a man delivering a bouquet of flowers from Kurt to Chris and Theo reacting to the idea of one man sending another man flowers by saying that it is “definitely a little too gay” for him. (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 27)

Using critical media literacy, the focus groups that Streitmatter conducted could become a starting point to probe both the students’ and teacher’s “comfort level” with scenes of gay and lesbian intimacy and sexuality, as well as students’ and teacher’s assumptions about tolerance, equality, media representation, and sexuality. Questions such as the following could be asked:

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62 This clip drew from several later episodes of the season.
• Why are you uncomfortable with seeing “more intimate” scenes involving nonheterosexual persons? How do media and other cultural institutions contribute to that discomfort?

• Were Chris and Kurt represented in different ways than heterosexual couples on the show? Are you similarly uncomfortable with those images? Are Chris and Kurt flaunting their sexuality? Do heterosexual couples on the show do that?

• How often do you see “public displays of affection” by homosexual persons in your daily lives? By heterosexual persons? Do social sanctions work to regulate such displays in different ways?

• Can you be pro gay rights and still not want to see “more intimate” scenes of gay persons? Is there a paradox between the view that gay people “should be allowed to live openly” (Streitmatter’s assumption about youth attitudes [2003, p. 51]) and not wanting to see certain aspects of their lives (when such aspects are a key part of the representation of heterosexual persons on The Real World)?

Follow-up questions could probe further into reasons why focus group participants apparently liked Chris and did not like Aneesa. Attitudes toward the characters in the other TV programs could also be discussed. Are gay and lesbian characters expected to display certain ethical behaviors? Why do they think Aneesa was so open with her sexuality? Are there other ways she could be seen as ethical?

We could ask all of the participants, Streitmatter included, not only why are they more comfortable when they see homosexuality rendered this way but whether these assumptions and preferences reflect different standards in terms of ethical behavior between gay and lesbian and straight characters/cast members? Is participants’ lack of comfort due to their not seeing images of “out and proud” gay youth to the degree that they seeing images
of gay youth coming out of the closet? Is Aneesa liked less because she is so open and “already out”; in other words, because she is not burdened by the need to come out to the same degree as Chris? Is it important for heterosexual persons on TV and in “real life” to struggle with their sexuality? If so, is this a normalizing expectation? What if Chris had “held back” in revealing that he is gay?

Conclusion

Streitmatter’s work, like that of Lee Rose, the writer-director of The Truth About Jane, is well-intentioned. But, as I have discussed, his approach is problematic because it leaves intact homophobic attitudes toward gay visibility. I grounded his approach in the politics of assimilation undergirding the projects of GLAAD and other mainstream gay rights groups. And, as illustrated by the correspondence between his hypotheses, findings, and conclusion, his report works to reproduce the status quo. Critical media literacy may be a viable alternative approach that would challenge the assumptions of both Streitmatter and his students.

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63 In the season’s companion book, The Real World You Never Saw, Aneesa said she came out when she was 13-years-old (Pollet, 2002).
CHAPTER 5

Television, family, and cultural struggle in the United States in the early 2000s

This chapter explores the interrelationship between U.S. television and cultural politics around issues of homosexuality in the early 2000s. The TV texts that I examine are wide-ranging. They include two TV movies that emerged in the aftermath of Matthew Shepard’s murder; a PBS children’s program designed to highlight the diversity of U.S. families; a daytime soap opera that featured the first lesbian main character in the genre; and a media advocacy group’s initiative to combat youth homophobia. The chapter uses these texts as a context for discussing broader social issues and cultural anxieties, in which TV is embedded as part of its discursive context.

I conclude the chapter by considering the politics of LGBT groups’ and individuals’ investments in mediated representation, particularly as a visibility strategy. Previous chapters have examined liberal efforts by TV insiders and outsiders to use television to make families and peer relationships a healthier climate for gay youth. In evaluating specific projects by TV makers and media advocacy groups, I argued that efforts to work “within the system” were often compromised, by factors ranging from genre conventions and conceptions of audience tastes to an investment in using a specific visibility strategy (mainstreaming) to promote gay rights. In adding other examples to the discussion, this chapter situates the efforts discussed in previous chapters within a broader context, that of political currents in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (See Figure 14.)
Figure 14. Map showing pertinent media texts and cultural events that occurred between 1995 and 2005.
Matthew Shepard, anxieties about gay youth, and the work of the TV movie

The core details comprising Matthew Shepard’s life and death are easily familiar to most U.S. audiences: A white gay college student, found beaten and bound to a fence in the rural outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming; a victim of a vicious hate crime, whose attackers lured him from a bar and beat him so severely that he would lie comatose for five days before dying on October 12, 1998. The story, repeated over and over again, in news and entertainment media and in a variety of other commentary and performances (e.g., website discussion and memorials, candlelight vigils, a play), became a national media event.

Why and how did Shepard’s murder become “the most recognizable symbol of antigay violence in America” (Shenitz, 2001, as cited in Ott & Aoki, 2002, p. 489)? As Gross (2001) notes, Shepard’s attack occurred amid a national debate on hate crimes against racial minorities, which was spurred by the dragging death of James Byrd, a black heterosexual man, in Texas that June. Thus, media were primed to take a “hate crime angle” in covering the case early on. The story subsequently escalated into an increasingly broader focus (see Figure 15: *Time Magazine*’s cover story, “The war over gays”), which Gross (2001) attributes to its occurrence shortly before National Coming Out Day the next month. Thus, the story fit topical news media frames around the issues of hate crimes and gay rights.

In an analysis of the rhetorical construction of news accounts surrounding Shepard’s death and its aftermath, Ott and Aoki (2002) further contextualize the story’s resonance, functioning, and corresponding short-term impact. Drawing from the dramaturgical work

64 Shortly after Shepard’s murder, Billy Jack Gaither, a rural gay Alabama man, was also killed in an alleged hate crime; this event was then folded into the “Shepard story.”

65 Ott and Aoki (2002) examined news coverage of Shepard’s murder appearing from October 10, 1998 (when the story was first reported nationally) to December 2001 (roughly
of Burke (1941), they theorize that news media, drawn to spectacle and lurid sensationalism as prominent news values, were driven to convey (and reconvey) the gruesomeness of Shepard’s bodily condition. The focus in early local news stories on powerful and symbolic imagery (i.e., descriptions of Shepard’s body displayed in a crucifix or as a scarecrow), and graphic detail of the violence inflicted on Shepard, personalized the attack and made the story more attractive as a national news item. In addition, because Shepard did not die for several days after he was found, the story allowed for sustained coverage, with new developments to be reported on, which made it even more compelling. His attack already associated with antigay violence, Shepard would become a political symbol when he died one day after National Coming Out Day (Ott & Aoki, 2002).

Figure 15. The cover of Time Magazine’s October 26, 1998, issue.

two years after McKinney was convicted). They identified four phases of coverage: naming the event, making a political symbol, expunging the evil within, and restoring the social order.
Out of this extensive coverage emerged a sense of tragedy, Ott and Aoki (2002) contend, which, in turn, engendered guilt and a need for punishment and resolution in the U.S. public – hence, after constructing Shepard as an innocent victim, storytelling worked to scapegoat his two attackers. So, while early coverage had framed perpetrators Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson in the context of generalized homophobia, subsequent coverage emphasized deep, personal character flaws and geography. The two became low-class, redneck, delinquent, drug using, ill-educated monsters. That Shepard was young and upper-middle-class, with a slight stature and all-American looks, and a family name associated with Christianity, further enabled him to be read as an innocent victim, martyr, and a son “like yours.” The subsequent plea deal for Henderson and guilty verdict in the trial of McKinney allowed for punishment to be meted out and for closure to be obtained, along with catharsis and a minimization of blame, which had the paradoxical effect of reducing the debate over hate crimes and gay rights that Shepard-related coverage had helped fuel. So, rather than portray Shepard’s death within a larger context of hate crimes against sexual and other minorities, or even in terms of youth violence, it was characterized as an incident caused by two “bad” people – and not as being one of systematic homophobia. With the Matthew Shepard story “framed primarily in tragic terms,” the public, “through the scapegoat mechanism, cleansed itself of the guilt associated with prejudice, hatred, violence,

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66 Drawing from Burke’s work, Ott and Aoki (2002, p. 493) note, “With the surrogate of evil driven from the community, all that remains for creating symbolic closure is the punishment of evil and the reaffirmation of the social and moral order.”

67 Ott and Aoki (2001) point to numerous polls showing widespread support, in the early weeks following Shepard’s death, for inclusion of sexual orientation under hate crimes statutes; legislation was introduced in 26 states and at the federal level as well. Yet, such legislation passed only in one state, Missouri, and, a few weeks after the trial, the federal measure was removed from a budget bill in special committee.
and their intersection” (Ott & Aoki, 2001, p. 496). Paradoxically, the extensive focus on Shepard’s (homo)sexuality continued the stigmatizing association of gay youth and homosexuality more generally with risk and deviance, thus, perpetuating the “straight” discursive formation of news (Alwood, 1996).

In Chapter 2, I positioned the telefilm *The Truth About Jane* as emerging in the context described by Ott and Aoki (2001): as that of national mourning and a sense of guilt over Shepard’s murder. And, like the news coverage they studied, the telefilm performed a specific function as it was targeted specifically to *parents*. It is important to note that the made-for-TV movie is a hybrid television form that blends news, information, and entertainment and surveils other media and cultural texts to present issues that are topical and resonant with the viewing audience. Ott and Aoki (2002, p. 484), drawing from Burke’s theory suggest that such discursive forms provide “mental equipment” to individuals and groups for dealing with problems in life, including public trauma like Shepard’s murder.

Challenging oft-stated criticisms that the TV movie is reductive, simplistic, and conservative (see Gitlin, 1983), Rapping (1992) also argues that the genre serves as a pivotal site for the negotiation of public events. The telefilm does this through its “story about the (American) family” (Rapping, 1992, p. xi):

68 Producers favor “hot concept problems that can be transformed into salacious…highly promotable” commodities (Schulze, 1990, p. 364). Although it evolved as a variant of the feature film, the telefilm has a narrative structure that is distinct from both the feature film and series programming. There is less elaborate mise-en-scène, less action and more use of interiors and medium- and close-up shots, and more focus on character development, with more focus on interactions between dyads (Edgerton, 1991; Gitlin, 1983; Gomery, 1983; Rapping, 1992). Scene and dialogue are economized to advance the plot and reveal character. Plotting is also influenced by commercial breaks, serving to break up the narrative with several mini-climaxes.

69 Lifetime TV movies have been particularly derided. Popular and academic criticism and parody have chastised Lifetime programming for (1) defusing its feminist message with
[TV movies] matter because they operate in a unique way as discursive sites upon which representations and ideologies of “the family” are struggled over first in the text itself and then in the larger public sphere of social and political relations, by virtue of the form’s special position among popular narrative texts and its intertextual relations to other discursive structures – news broadcasts, media critique and debate, formal and informal gatherings in which the movies and their topics are discussed. (Rapping, 1992, p. xvii)

Shepard’s murder was the subject of three TV movies. *Anatomy of a Hate Crime* was cablecast on MTV in January 2001 as a centerpiece of the network’s year-long campaign, “Fight for Your Rights: Take a Stand Against Discrimination.” *The Laramie Project*, adapted from the popular, award-winning play of the same name, and *The Matthew Shepard Story* premiered on HBO and NBC, respectively, in March 2002. Made a few years after his death, these telefilms work to further process and resolve the grief that still lingered in the national consciousness from Shepard’s murder, especially the anxieties felt by parents about gay youth.

*The Matthew Shepard Story*, which aired on NBC, is a prototypical telefilm. (See Figure 16.) The family melodrama depicts the struggles Shepard’s parents, especially his mother Judy, face in deciding what recommendations to make regarding the sentencing of McKinney and Henderson. Although Shepard’s parents initially want to request the death penalty, after they reflect and learn more about their son’s life, they decide it would be more

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(1) an emphasis on emotionality that hegemonically reinscribes traditional femininity, (2) constructing liberal feminist narratives that privilege personal agency while ignoring the influence of social relations, and (3) espousing a universal feminism (i.e., its slogan, “Television for Women”) that is belied by a focus on white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class women as wives and mothers (see Byars & Meehan, 1995).
in keeping with Matthew’s non-violent demeanor to ask that McKinney and Henderson be given prison terms and not the death penalty. The telefilm illustrates the three-part trajectory that Rapping (1992) finds is constitutive of the genre: (1) the narrative problem is made visible -- the parents achieve some closure, conviction and a plea deal, only to face an agonizing decision about what to recommend to the judge; (2) a family crisis emerges and escalates -- the parents struggle over what to do, for their son’s memory and for their relationship; and, finally, (3) the problem is resolved and the family restored -- the parents make their decision and achieve some peace of mind and a sense that justice has been achieved. In this way, The Matthew Shepard Story can be viewed as providing further “symbolic closure” (Ott & Aoki, 2002, p. 493) and meaning making to this “senseless” act of brutality.

The Truth About Jane works in a similar vein, though the guilt it seeks to allay is not just that stemming from Shepard’s murder but the more general guilt arising from producing a gay youth.\(^7\) It focuses on the mother’s transformation.

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\(^7\) “I keep trying to make sense out of it in movies, because I can’t make sense out of it in the real world,” veteran writer-director Lee Rose says about the murders of Shepard and Byrd, as well as the broader climate of hate crimes (Elber, 2000, p. E7). Although conceived, Rose notes, before Shepard’s murder, the 2000 telefilm certainly seems a response to one call that emerged in the discussion of Shepard’s death: that of parents needing to better support their gay children. Rose says the film is meant to be prescriptive: to “walk a kid or a parent through a minefield” (cited in Kaye, 2001, para 14) and that she will have succeeded “if even one parent or one child finds comforts or answers” in the telefilm (Elber, 2000, p. E7). Rose wanted to convey that families can be made stronger by this “crisis” (also, that gay youth – while their development may be different than that of straight youth – can be just as healthy). Targeting mothers, whom research shows feel more sense of loss and grief when their children reveal themselves to be nonheterosexual (Robinsin, Walters, & Skeen, 1989), Rose is especially focused on Janice’s story – hence, her choice to work with Lifetime, which, as discussed in the chapter, targets “wives and mothers” (Byars & Meehan, 1995; Rasmusson, 2001).
In Chapter 2, I sought to problematize the “identity work” Janice does by turning to the work of Fields (2001). The parents of gay children in Fields’ study were consumed with so much guilt that they sought to “normalize” their children as well-adjusted and “normify” themselves as good parents. To explain the impulse to do this, Fields (2001, p. 166) refers to the cultural logic -- the “rhetorics of blame” or “those institutionalized understandings that define deviance and establish its causes” -- that attribute youth homosexuality to parental influence, especially mothers.

Here, I want to make the same argument about the telefilm, overall, which, I argue, “recast[s] the past” (Feinstein, 1982; as cited in Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989, p. 73) to allay parental concerns that they may have caused their children’s homosexuality. *The Truth About Jane* does this by presenting Jane as having had a “normal” childhood. It also does this by shifting the narrative attention from Jane to Janice and her unfinished identity crisis -- achieving this through a role reversal, of sorts, between mother and daughter. Indeed, in the
opening sequence of the telefilm, the camera shows the exterior of the hospital, follows paramedics wheeling a hospital cart down a lengthy hallway, then suddenly shifting to a new corridor. Finally, the camera leaves this patient and veers right, going into a surgical room where a woman (Janice) is giving birth (to Jane). This turn is meant to convey the normalcy of one’s child being born straight…or gay (i.e., “life’s unexpected turns”). The message is ultimately that youth homosexuality can happen even in the “best” of families. In attributing Jane’s lesbianism to chance (“life’s unexpected turns”) the telefilm works to remove any responsibility from the healthy, middle-class parenting shown in the montage of early scenes.

Writing in the early 1990s, approximately 20 years after homosexuality had been declassified as a mental illness by the major medical and psychological associations, Sedgwick (1993) scrutinized a new disorder, gender dysmorphia, that was being increasingly diagnosed in youth with atypical modes of gender role identification (e.g., effeminate boys). She argued that, under the guise that they are accepting and affirmative, ego psychology models now view being a gay male as healthy, but not if one is effeminate, because this may signify improper development (e.g., the boy lacks sufficient masculine validation). In other words, cultural changes, including, ostensibly, the normalization of homosexuality, have given way to new forms of homophobia. We can view the normative models of healthy gender identity formation conveyed by The Truth About Jane as being immersed, then, in a liberal discourse that seems progressive regarding youth homosexuality, if only to mask a desire to find the cause of it and ultimately to squelch gay youth existence.

As Walters (2001) noted, in The Truth About Jane, the only thing loving parents can do is accept and tolerate their gay children’s homosexuality because, otherwise, the family would be left intact. Rather than accept Jane out of an ethical principle, the parents are motivated
by a fear of loss: They might lose their daughter. They also do not want to be seen as bad parents.

In the context of a history of TV movies that equate youth homosexuality with bad, absent parenting, *The Truth About Jane* seems liberal and affirmative. But, youth homosexuality is still a problem that threatens the family’s coherence and stability. Rapping (1992, p. 59) views the TV movie as being targeted to dominant social groups, such as whites, middle-class parents, and heterosexuals, addressing them “as members of a social order being threatened by a disruptive force.”

It is not surprising, then, that the telefilm erases youth homosexuality in the domesticated space of the middle-class family by making Jane’s girlfriend, Taylor, serve as the signifier of the “real” lesbian. By the end of the telefilm, neither Taylor, who has abruptly broken up with Jane, nor her mother is anywhere to be seen; they have moved away. Taylor is the sexually experienced newcomer living on the wrong side of the tracks. If Taylor functions as the “real” lesbian, her absent, abusive, single mother who -- although never visually rendered, is heard screaming at her daughter -- is juxtaposed against that of Janice as a good mother. This characterization, thus, reinforces the trope of youth homosexuality as being deviant and due to bad parenting (see Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992).

This section discussed the public trauma caused by Matthew Shepard’s murder and how news coverage and also made-for-TV movies worked to address the grief and parental anxieties elicited by his murder. Below, I discuss how television was inserted into a particular

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1 The TV movie, for example, has depicted divorced, multiracial, and single-parent families, and those with adopted children, but many scholars view the genre, ultimately, as naturalizing a conception of the bourgeois, white, heterosexual (nuclear) family and, therefore, maintaining the status quo in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Gitlin, 1983; Gomery, 1983; Rapping, 1992).
public controversy, reflecting cultural anxieties about marriage rights for same-sex couples, queer adults, and culture.

Postcards from Buster and anxieties about gay marriage

In January 2005 the PBS children’s program Postcards from Buster became the focal point of a controversy when Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, a new appointee of the Bush administration, sent a letter to PBS asserting that “many parents would not want their young children exposed to the lifestyles portrayed in this episode” (as cited in Vary, 2005, para 5). Her letter also asked that funding used to create the program be returned. The episode featured the animated rabbit Buster – the program is a mixture of live action and animation – visiting a lesbian household in Vermont. The premise of Buster is that a young rabbit (Buster) travels with his father to visit children across the country living in an array of families. (See Figure 17.)

The controversy over Buster illustrates the backlash that occurred in the United States after The Truth About Jane premiered in summer 2000 to rights claims and visibility efforts around LGBT issues. Buster, and gay marriage, more broadly, can be understood in terms of Walters’ (2001) concept of “rage.” Gains in LGBT visibility – from being covered on TV or challenging legal inequities, such as the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Lawrence v. Texas – fueled antigay efforts to suppress that very visibility. The Lawrence ruling was a key event precipitating the use of gay rights by rightwing groups as a wedge issue during the 2004 U.S. General Election. To drive voters to the polls, these rightwing groups pushed for several local, state, and federal constitutional amendments that would limit marriage as something between one man and one woman. Voters in many states approved the amendments.
Writing in the late 1990s, cultural critics such as Edelman (1998) and Berlant and Warner (1998) both charted how liberals and conservatives colluded against queer rights by framing them as anti-child and anti-family. Education Secretary Spellings’ rationale against Buster, as well as that used to argue against marriage rights for same-sex couples was basically that children and culture itself will be harmed by granting gay families visibility and rights.

Although writing about a different situation, that concerning a controversy over the granting of adoption rights to gay couples in France, Judith Butler’s (2002) work is also helpful in understanding the deep fears elicited by rights claims put forth by gay and lesbian people in the area of kinship. Opponents of the measure asserted that adoption rights for gay men and lesbians would harm children and that children needed opposite-sex parents to be psychologically healthy. Butler (2002) discussed how this sentiment was grounded by a broader resurgence of neolacanian psychoanalysis that believes that a child needs a mother

Figure 17. The families featured in “Sugartime!,” the controversial episode of Postcards from Buster.
and a father to enter into language. This form of psychoanalysis views heterosexuality as foundational to culture. Butler (2002) attributed the resurgence of neolacanian psychoanalysis, and structuralism, more broadly, with the fear of gay parenting destroying culture. The broader context for this fear, Butler asserted, was a climate in Europe marked by deep insecurity over immigration and racial change.

In the previous section, I argued that the made-for-TV movie *The Truth About Jane* responded to parental anxieties about gay youth. And, offering a similar argument to the one made by Ott and Aoki (2002) about the form and function of news coverage, I examined how the form of *The Truth About Jane* worked to contain parental fears about youth homosexuality destroying the family. The section below probes further into the underlying structural foundation of U.S. television and how this complicates the representation of homosexuality.

**Soap opera and the curse of structuralism**

Soap operas demonstrate the “anachronism” discussed by Butler (2002, p. 32) in that they cling to a kinship system based on heterosexuality even though the system is far from universal in the real world. Underpinned by structural kinship (see Allen, 1985), soap operas have struggled, even more than the rest of television, to convey social changes and the array of family forms in the United States. The inclusion of gay characters has been particularly problematic for the genre because they are viewed as “afamilial” (Butler, 1990; Modleski, 1990). The genre’s conception of basic sexual differences, which many feminists consider problematic, has endured, nonetheless.

Bianca Montgomery, the first major lesbian character introduced on a U.S. daytime soap opera, was thought to be more sustainable because she was inside the kinship structure. Bianca was popular, and many viewers and critics supported the character having romantic
relationships. Yet, the decision by producers to insert Bianca into an elaborate rape storyline in July 2003 led to a series of subsequent events — a pregnancy stemming from the rape, the acquittal and subsequent murder of her rapist, the break-up of her relationship with Lena, a protracted “baby switch” storyline, etc. — that many lesbian fans and critics writing for the soap trades found disconcerting and frustrating.

In Chapter 3, I focused on the evolution of the narrative and fan and critic engagement in the soap. Over time, it became clear to these fans and critics that All My Children writers and producers were never fully committed to realizing a lesbian character in the same way they rendered heterosexual characters. Fans charged that writers and producers crafted this string of plot developments to avoid dealing with lesbian sexuality, something that ultimately led to Bianca being less and less compelling and or even relevant as a lesbian character on television. Hence, it was no surprise that she was written out in February 2005.

Below is a quote by Eden Riegel, the actor who portrayed Bianca, rebutting criticisms about why Bianca was raped:

> Obviously, she was targeted because she's Erica's daughter, not because she's a lesbian. Just because it's Bianca doesn't mean it's some kind of hate crime. She's a victim because of who loves her and because of what they have done to this very sick man [Michael Cambias, Bianca’s rapist]. – Eden Riegel (Bianca) (“The Real Reason,” 2003, p. 4).

Riegel’s quote takes care to note that Michael raped Bianca because “she’s Erica Kane’s daughter.” Indeed, soap opera is a genre not only where sexual violence is a normal part of female experience but where daughters pay a price for their mothers’ sins. In
challenging feminist recuperations of the genre as a site for female spectatorship,

Livingstone and Liebes (1995) make an argument about the scope and effects of soap opera’s *oedipal* structure. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, the authors liken the repetitive nature of soap opera storytelling to fairy tales and also to therapeutic practice. They assert that soap opera females are mostly motherless daughters in that mothers, having abandoned their daughters for men and power, are “rarely good, real and present” (p. 165). “While the absent mother allows the viewer (in the subject position of daughter) to enjoy a sense of freedom and a separate identity independent of her mother, the return of the soap mother tests this autonomy. At this point, the daughter is often shown to fail as the mother returns to manipulate or undermines the daughter’s life” (Livingstone & Liebes, 1995, p. 166).

And, when mothers return, as is often the case with soap opera storytelling, the mothers compete with their daughters over men and power. Livingstone and Liebes (1995, pp. 161-162) explain that this complicates female identity formation: “Their eventual possible reappearance facilitates a narrative pattern of either rejection and competition or of symbiosis and victimization.” The repetition of “missing mothers, dependence on men, self-destructiveness in women, failure of romantic and nurturing relationships, impermanence of marriage, self-sacrificial good mother versus the egoistic bad mother” (p. 169) socializes the female spectator into patriarchal femininity. “The absence of the mother affects the daughter in her subsequent relationships, forever recycling the original trauma” (Livingstone & Liebes, 1995, p. 168).

Livingstone and Liebes’ (1995) argument helps in understanding the Bianca storyline, and, in particular, the producers’ decision to tie Bianca’s rape into that of Erica’s previous one. In many ways, Bianca is presented as cursed by being Erica’s daughter. Bianca’s half-
sister Kendall is, as well. A core assumption in the work of Livingstone and Liebes (1995) is that change is difficult in the genre, that the reason soap operas are so cyclical and repetitive is because of their underlying structural form. Their work is helpful in conjunction with Butler (2000), who provides a more elaborate discussion of the curse of oedipus on femininity and on kinship – of why gender roles and heterosexism are so difficult to change.

At the same time, the Bianca post-coming out storyline also illustrated a continual struggle between writers, producers, and network executives, on one side, and lesbian fan and advocacy groups, on the other side. Even though the latter groups believed their efforts were stymied by network imperatives (to avoid depicting lesbian sexuality, seemingly, at all costs), their struggle continually pressured the program to pursue unintended storylines. In this way, the storyline does not necessarily have to be read as a “failure.”

Representation and critical thinking

In many ways, the desire for representation by the lesbian fans and advocacy groups, as well as the Buster moms, parallels those of some gay and lesbian people who want state legitimacy in the sphere of marriage. Butler’s (2002) argument about the risks of such a desire is worth exploring. First, she noted the irony of the situation where the state is simultaneously sought for recognition and condemned for its regulation of gay kinship. Then, Butler made a forceful argument about how this pursuit of state legitimacy is “double-edged” (2002, p. 20). It forecloses other options, reinforces as natural one family form, has a

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Butler’s (2000) argued that the Oedipus plays – and, especially, the Antigone figure in them - can be rethought. Contrary to conventional readings, Antigone, according to Butler, demonstrates agency. This rethinking led Butler to argue that normative kinship is not inherent, universal, and ahistorical. It is open to cultural change. It can be based on “doing” versus “being”; this conception would move past the primacy of biological relations as a model of ideal kinship.
negative effect on radical sexual politics, leaves out others (thus, perpetuating the 
normalizing effects of the state’s regulation of kinship), and is, above all, tenuous.

The work of mainstream advocacy groups such as GLAAD in trying to challenge 
youth homophobia (e.g., the 2003 report discussed in Chapter 4) illustrates Butler’s (2002) 
concern. In seeking legitimacy by making youth more “comfortable” with seeing gay youth 
in mass media, the report concluded that media makers should be encouraged to feature gay 
youth who struggled to accept their sexuality and who were seen as morally upstanding. 
According to Bell and Binnie (2000), this tactic concurs with a “politics of assimilation,” 
found among many gay rights advocates, that colludes with the state’s desire that gay 
sexuality be private. Butler (2000) and Bell and Binnie (2000) concur that the pursuit of this 
strategy of legitimation by gay rights proponents (i.e., agreeing to be private in exchange for 
some rights and recognition) ultimately works against the aims of gay rights.

Butler (2002) understood the desire, in a society where lack of recognition has very 
real costs, of some gay and lesbian people to seek state-sanctioning for their relationships. 
What she wanted to encourage, though, was having a “critical perspective” (Butler, 2002, p. 
20) that both scrutinized the costs of such an investment and kept the concerns of all 
nonheterosexuals as paramount.

Conclusion

This dissertation began as an effort to situate and critically examine TV 
programming from the early 2000s that was ostensibly designed to challenge a history of 
stigmatized portrayals of gay male and lesbian youth on U.S television. I was concerned, first, 
with describing the conditions in which a sense of urgency arose in the late 1990s to provide 
more positive TV representations of gay male and lesbian youth and their families. The 
focus of the chapters that followed was on examining the motivations, philosophies, and
impact of texts created by TV makers (writers, directors, and network executives) and advocacy groups to address what they viewed as a pressing social issue.

I argued that these liberal efforts, which had as their aim addressing homophobia among the families and peers of gay male and lesbian youth, were often compromised because the texts’ creators did not critically interrogate core assumptions about gender and sexual norms, tolerance, and acceptance. For instance, in her use of social psychological models to render how a teenage girl and her mother come to terms with the girl’s lesbianism, Lee Rose, the writer-director of The Truth About Jane (Chapter 2) never scrutinized the underlying view that having a gay child imputes a stigmatized identity to parents. Nor did she challenge the expectation many parents have that their children grow up to be heterosexual. Rather, the telefilm affirmed that accepting that one’s child is gay or lesbian can “take adjusting to” and that it is natural to feel a sense of loss. The focus of the telefilm was in validating the mother’s (Janice’s) tentative and incomplete steps toward acceptance. Thus, I argued that The Truth About Jane actually reinforces the stigma of youth homosexuality that it putatively wants to challenge.

Similarly, Rodger Streitmatter, the author of the GLAAD report discussed in Chapter 4, took as a given that the discomfort some youth audiences have with seeing gay male sexuality should be validated. Underlying his intervention was the view that the makers of youth-targeted media should be encouraged to render gay male and lesbian youth at the “comfort level” (Streitmatter, 2003, p. 9) of straight youth. I framed his well-intentioned study as a missed opportunity to challenge youth homophobia. Rather, Streitmatter accommodates antigay attitudes and, in so doing, his work, like Rose’s, serves to perpetuate antigay sentiments.
Streitmatter’s (2003) report was a component of GLAAD’s efforts to inform the mass media industries about how to best portray gay youth in entertainment products. Like many within the industry have done with other media products, Rose consulted GLAAD during the development of *The Truth About Jane*. The writing staff of *All My Children* also consulted the organization as it was crafting Bianca’s coming out storyline. In Chapter 4, I argued that Streitmatter’s internalized understanding of the limits of tolerance shaped his research, for example, accounting for the correspondence between his hypotheses, findings, and conclusions. This approach, of working within the received limits of what youth audiences currently find comfortable, I suggested, reproduced normalized images of gay youth as the only allowable images. In effect, it warded off the potential for change.

On a broader level, the constrained, self-reinforcing effects that characterize Streitmatter’s (2003) work also undergird the interrelationships between TV makers and media advocacy in their negotiation of the limits of gay male and lesbian youth representation on contemporary U.S. television. (See Figure 18.) TV makers such as Rose and the *All My Children* writing staff obtained knowledge about what works best in representing gay male and lesbian youth from GLAAD. As shown by Streitmatter’s approach, GLAAD, meanwhile, elicits its knowledge of what works best from programming, media commentary, public opinion, and audiences whose attitudes about gay male and lesbian youth have already been quite constrained. When the organization legitimizes this knowledge by disseminating it to the TV industry, it supports a self-reinforcing system that makes change very difficult to achieve.

The purpose of this concluding chapter was to consider how texts addressing issues faced by gay youth and adults, and their respective families, were embedded in the broader cultural politics of the 2000s. I wanted to delineate how these efforts were inserted in, and
framed by, debates over gay rights in various spheres such as marriage and parenting. And, I wanted to show how the backlash to gay rights claims that was seen in the broader political sphere was sometimes enacted by and through television. I believe that this work yields an even richer understanding of the “failures” charted in the previous chapters. Specifying the historical context, ideological work, political economy, narrative strategies, and power relations undergirding TV programming is essential if we are to assess the complex, overlapping relationship between media texts, cultural practices, and social policies. I consider this work as necessary for understanding and critiquing the changing representational practices of gay male and lesbian youth on U.S. television in the early 2000s.
Figure 18. The circular and self-sustaining process by which TV makers and media advocacy and fan groups negotiate the limits of gay male and lesbian youth representation on contemporary U.S. television.
## Appendix A

Model of Individuals Adjusting to a Homosexual Identity (Cass, 1979)

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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Example from Plot of <em>The Truth About Jane</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <em>Identity Confusion:</em> There is a growing awareness of same-sex feelings and a sense of difference from peers.</td>
<td>At her new high school, Jane finds herself enmeshed in a clique of three girls, who tease her about not being interested in boys, when a classmate, Ned, flirts with her. Yet, she is drawn to a new, female transfer student named Taylor, and subsequent scenes reveal the quick development of a close relationship. This worries Jane, who wonders, “Why wasn’t I like my friends? Why couldn’t I just like a boy named Ned? I was in trouble. Big, big trouble. I had a crush on a girl.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <em>Identity Comparison:</em> One tries to disavow one’s homosexuality. Strategies range from being celibate to performing heterosexuality in an exaggerated manner in order to “pass” to claiming a self-</td>
<td>Jane tries to nurture a crush on Ned but does not meet with much success. She also discounts the lesbian meanings of her relationship with Taylor: When Taylor kisses her for the first time, Jane asks, in voiceover,</td>
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identity as bisexual, for example. “Did this make me gay? No, it was just an
innocent crush, a phase. But, I also know
that it was the first moment in my life that I
ever felt connected to someone.” Her
confusion continues, though, and, after
having sex with Taylor, Jane tells her, “it’s
not normal.” When confronted by her
parents over her sexuality – after they have
received an anonymous phone call baiting
Jane for kissing a girl -- Jane attempts to pass
by going along with her father’s assertion
that her experience with Taylor only
constituted a practice session for kissing
(boys).

3. *Identity Tolerance* There is a growing
realization of a stable homosexual
identity and the making of timid steps
into the gay and lesbian “community.”

During Ms. Wolcott’s English class for
example, on a day that they are reading
*Wuthering Heights*, Jane comments, “I think all
the greatest stories ever written were about
love no matter what plot they’re wrapped
in.” Also, after Taylor breaks up with her,
Jane sneaks out past her curfew to go to a
gay and lesbian club. She also hits her
brother and a classmate when they tease her
about her sexuality. Torn by guilt for not
having the courage to tell her parents the truth, Jane also seek advice from her mother’s gay male friend, Jimmie, who advises her to come out only when she is ready.

4. **Identity Acceptance** Individuals begin to positively accept their being gay or lesbian, and, increasingly, they start to disclose their sexual orientation to others.

During dinner, Jane’s brother calls her a “dyke,” and her father rebuts that this is “just gossip,” Jane exhorts, “It’s not just gossip! I lied to the two of you [her mother and father] because I was afraid. Afraid that you’d hate me, afraid that you’d throw me out. I did kiss Taylor, and I think I’m in love with her.” Janice responds by saying, “She’s a girl,” while Robert says, “You don’t know what you’re saying,” to which Jane cries, “Why is it wrong for me to care about someone and for someone to care about me?” Then, she exclaims, “I’m gay!” Both Jane’s reluctance to come out and her worry about the effects this will have on her family are also conveyed in her voiceover: (1) “It was now or never. And, I would have preferred never. It was out of control, and I had to do something. So, I took the biggest
breath I’ve ever taken in my life.” and (2) “I wasn’t sorry about how I felt. But, believe it or not, I was sorry about tearing my parents apart.” Seemingly dejected, her voiceover reveals a growing acceptance, even pride: “When I said it was a phase, it wasn’t. I was gay, with or without Taylor. I knew it deep down for a long time. But, what my mother didn’t know was that I was exactly the way I was meant to be, whether she liked it or not.”

5. **Identity Pride**: Individuals, having accepted their gay/lesbian sexuality, start to immerse themselves into the gay and lesbian “community.” They also become more aware of, and angry, about heterosexual privilege and, subsequently, active about challenging it. After coming out to her parents, though, Jane’s relationship with her parents goes from bad to worse. Her mother sends Jane to a therapist (in the hopes that this “cure” her of her lesbianism), but she defiantly refuses to talk. Finally, when her parents talk about sending her away to boarding school, Jane runs away to the home of a supportive high school teacher, Ms. Wolcott, who is herself closeted. Ms. Wolcott goes to talk to Jane’s parents and finally persuades them to come see their daughter (only when it is clear that they might lose her if they do not come
6. *Identity Synthesis:* The intense anger felt over heterosexism becomes more sedated, and an increasingly complex view of it emerges. Also, one’s sexual identity becomes more integrated, and one begins to accept oneself and others. Jane’s arrival at this stage is suggested, when, right after she and her mother have a heart-to-heart at Ms. Wolcott’s house, Jane takes Janice to a meeting of PFLAG. In the next scene, we see the two out shopping, a mutual activity that Janice treasures and has not enjoyed with her daughter for a while. Subsequently, Jane sweetly tells both parents that they do not have to try so hard to accept her sexuality, even chiding her father for assuming that, because she is a lesbian, she must now like sports. She even reconciles with her brother, Brad.
Appendix B

Model of Parents Adjusting to a Child’s Disclosure of Nonheterosexuality

(Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989)

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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Example from Plot of <em>The Truth About Jane</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>**1.  **Shock: One is in a state of disbelief and puzzlement that one’s child is nonheterosexual. This is illustrated by a statement by a mother in Robinson, Walters, and Skeen’s (1989, p. 66) study: “I was hysterical. I spent two days in bed mentally hysterical. In the past I had never retreated to bed over anything.”</td>
<td>When Janice receives a phone call from an anonymous caller informing her that Jane is a lesbian – this after Jane’s brother Brad gossips about seeing Jane and Taylor kissing – she asks, incredulously, “Is this some kind of sick joke? Who would say such a thing?”</td>
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<td>**2.  **Denial: The parent refuses to believe that a child is gay or lesbian and sometimes attempts to make the child conform to a heterosexual identity (e.g., a mother saying, “I thought it was not really true, that she would still meet someone from the opposite sex with whom she could have an intimate relationship”</td>
<td>After the phone call, Janice and Robert go to talk to Jane (to warn her about the vicious gossip that has started). Neither even considers the possibility that Jane might be a lesbian; Robert surmises that she was just practicing kissing, as girls do, with Taylor. Later, when Jane, taunted by Brad, comes out to her parents during dinner one night,</td>
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Robert says, “You don’t know what you’re saying…This is just a phase.”

3. *Guilt*: Parents feel that their parenting played a role in their children becoming homosexual (e.g., a mother saying, “I thought it was an illness caused by something I had done wrong or failed to do that I should have done.” [Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989, pp. 66-67]). Parents also feel responsible for their children facing a life that they believe will be more difficult than if they were heterosexual.

4. *Anger*: Parents grow agitated with their children, casting them as ungrateful and/or spiteful. They may also resent them for other reasons (e.g., a mother saying, “I was angry that my child did not trust me enough to tell me. I had to confront her” [Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989, p. 67]).

Janice seems completely undone by Jane’s disclosure, asking, “What horrible thing did I do as a mother?” Although Robert also feels upset and guilty, he provides a voice of reason, saying, “We can’t turn our backs on this or let this tear us apart.”

Janice subsequently sends Jane to a therapist, with the implicit goal that this will rid her of her feelings for Taylor. Janice also becomes more and more alienated from her friends when they challenge her views: She tells Jimmie that she does not want Jane to be gay because she does not want Jane to have as hard as life as he has had. (Jimmie tells her that it is not her place to judge the quality of his life.) And, after her friend Beth tells her...
she is overreacting and needs to accept Jane for who she is, Janice asks, “What if I can’t?, to which Beth replies, “Then, you wouldn’t be a very good mother.” Janice also becomes increasingly estranged from Robert, who has become more tolerant toward his daughter’s sexuality. When Janice upsets Jane by saying that she is relieved that “this nonsense” will soon end (after Jane has just told them both that Taylor broke up with her), it is not only Jane, but also Robert, who leaves the dinner table in disgust: “My God, Janice, she’s hurting. Can’t you just be a mother for a minute?”

Also, during an argument, Jane inadvertently outs Ms. Wolcott to her parents as a lesbian, something that outrages Janice. Not heeding her husband’s urging to think this through, Janice immediately leaves to visit Ms. Wolcott at school and tell her to stay away from her daughter (under the threat that Janice will reveal her sexuality to the school board and risk her firing). Later, Janice and
Robert get into an argument over sending Jane away to boarding school, and Janice says, “I’m not going to let you make this my fault.” When Ms. Wolcott does come to their house to tell them that Jane has run away, Janice tells her, “I just don’t think that you should be teaching young girls and supporting alternative lifestyles just because they happen to be yours. Don’t you understand that Jane, and girls like Jane, are impressionable, that they look up to their teachers? They want to be just like them.”

5. Acceptance. After going through an adjustment process much like their child, where the parent learns more about what it means to be gay in this society, a parent resolves to accept her or his child as they are. This is illustrated by the following statement by a mother in Robinson, Walters, and Skeen’s (1989, p. 67) study: “I was pleased he had found himself, had friends. I wanted him to know I loved him.”

After Ms. Wolcott tells Janice that Jane had considered suicide, she and Robert go to Ms. Wolcott’s house to see their daughter. Janice sits down to talk to Jane. Here, Janice is in the very beginning stages of moving toward acceptance. Janice still is grieving the “normal” life she had envisioned for her daughter. She cannot bring herself to say the word, “lesbian,” and she admits that she does not think that she will ever, truly, accept her daughter’s homosexuality. At the urging of Jane, though, Janice starts attending
PFLAG meetings. Although she continues to struggle with accepting her daughter’s sexuality, Janice, by film’s end, is able to attend a PFLAG rally to show support for Jane.
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