Producing Containment:
The Rhetorical Construction of Difference in *Will & Grace*

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The same hip public that revels in genderfuck also lauds Eminem, convinced by critics that there's something heroic about his harangues, something playful in the standing ovation he gets for shouting: "Hate fags? The answer's yes!" Here, the feelings liberals have taught themselves to deny are fully exercised. Whatever guilt might attend that release is defused by the queer who attests to its harmlessness.

—Richard Goldstein, *The Attack Queers*

**How would you characterize a nation in which conservatives fume over the Supreme Court's refusal to sustain the criminalization of same-sex relations while celebratory lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups work to parlay the ruling into the legalization of same-sex marriage? A nation in which "Kill the Fags" is inscribed on the nose of a U.S. bomb being sent into war while programs such as *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* become hits? This is more than a nation confused about or divided by sexual politics. It is, in fact, a nation in the throes of ideological passion.**

The frenzy has been building for quite some time and is the result of an amalgamation of factors, social conflicts, and political efforts. Before Stonewall, for instance, gays and lesbians established activist and support groups like the Mattachine Society and The Daughters of Bilitis to challenge the cult of heterosexuality that produced shame and...
privileged invisibility. Feminists protested phallogocentric social practices that privileged males and relied on a logic that equates sex and gender, paving the way for much of the queer theory produced in recent years. The civil rights movement created a different frame of reference in which to make sense of politics, subjectivity, and the lived reality of human experience. And, as John D'Emilio details in Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, economic conditions at the national and personal levels not only made possible, but in some cases also required, significant changes to social structures such as the family, enabling the emergence and eventual acceptance of alternative families.

Although an all-too-condensed list of important factors related to the changes in LGBT politics and experience in the United States, the main point here is that myriad forces have enabled and influenced those changes. Not all forces have been positive, of course. Constitutional scholars, religious groups, and a broad range of other persons and organizations have used juridical, cultural, and physical strategies to contest the emergence of LGBT acceptance and to protect and resecure traditional social relations of power. The battle over sexuality, social policy, and individual freedom is more complex than the archetypal gay versus conservative dyad suggests, however. Debates over appropriate sexual politics take place as much within LGBT organizations as they do in general culture, as the interests and needs of a nonheterogeneous LGBT population often clash over issues of race, sex, class, gender, and political strategies and goals. From the Log Cabin Republicans to ACT UP, and the general population to the religious right, the state of “gay politics” is a state of contradictions and negotiations of power where inclusion is tempered by violence, and cooperation by competition. This article interrogates one site of this social negotiation, NBC's popular Emmy-winning program Will & Grace.¹

The show is an important site of analysis for multiple reasons. When approximately “2% of the 540 lead or supporting [television] roles” are estimated to be gay characters, for instance, Will & Grace's primetime representations make sexual difference visible on a weekly basis (Shister, qtd. in Walters 103). It is currently the only network program based on a gay protagonist (Will, played by Eric McCormack). And, unlike many other programs, it opts not to represent gayness through a fleeting storyline of same-sex attraction or a single character.² Secondary characters include both Jack (Sean Hayes), a “screaming queen” who Will says is identifiably gay to both “dead men and dogs,” and
Karen (Megan Mullally), a wife and mother who could be described as a fag-hag, rich bitch, and flighty drunk who only ambiguously inhabits a heterosexual identity position (Holleran, "Alpha" 1). If we are to understand more fully Will & Grace's role in the process of sociopolitical negotiation, however, and if we are to understand a broader range of its representations and ideological effects, we must consider more than how the show breaks from heteronormative expectations. We must also consider how its inclusionary cast of characters and its homocentric plots function to perpetuate inequity.

Exploring the program as a contradictory site that renders difference visible and even pleasing to a mass mainstream audience while also reproducing logics that enable inequity is critical at this political moment. In addition to the fact that cultural literacy is intimately linked to visual media, representations of LGBT persons on mainstream programs are becoming a norm rather than an exception, increased visibility and violence against the gender and sexual Other seem to go hand in hand, and sexuality is often understood as separate from social constructs of race, sex, and class such that the sometimes complicit role that LGBT politics have played in the reproduction of social inequity is elided. In this article, then, I extend Suzanna Walters's depiction of Will & Grace as the "new homophobia on TV" to argue that the program works to enforce hegemonic social relations of inequity in a broader sense as well (113).

In spite of its challenges to heterosexist ensembles and narrative frameworks, the program's popular and industry acclaim, as well as its limited backlash, are largely due to the liberal façade created by its discourse of humor and apolitical rhetorical stance. These features allow the show to appeal to and further normalize oppressive ideologies of class, race, sexuality, and patriarchy even while appearing to advocate on behalf of the gay Other.

Establishing a Rhetorical Stance:
An Apolitical, Comedic Appeal

Other than extremists, I don’t know how the show could offend.
—Eric McCormack (Will), "Will Power"

McCormack's assertion about Will & Grace's power, or lack thereof, to disturb audiences is telling: it suggests that the program's representations
tend to conform to social conceptions of acceptability, thereby remaining inoffensive. Both the disavowal of politics and the deployment of humor work in conjunction to secure this effect; they create an effective rhetorical stance by which *Will & Grace* can represent the Other while also appealing to a broad audience.

Even the most cursory review of the literature demonstrates how *Will & Grace* has been linked to an apolitical stance. While Max Mutchnick, the self-identified gay cocreator and executive producer, says that he feels a responsibility to the community to present a realistic image of gay life and its tensions, for instance, other representatives of the show deny that political commitment. According to Debra Messing, who plays Grace, “it’s not a gay show” (Natale 33). McCormack asserts, “We’re not a political show” (Lipton 81). And as reported in an *Advocate* review of the television program, “[t]he show’s creators . . . distance themselves from Ellen DeGeneres’ cancelled series by telling *Daily Variety*’s Amy Archerd, ‘We have no intention of making the same mistake’” (24). Whereas “Ellen really wanted to make a statement” about her identity and the healthiness of lesbian romantic relationships, says network ad buyer Aaron Cohen, that’s “far from what they do on ‘Will and Grace’” (Freeman 35). In fact, Warren Littlefield, programming chief at NBC, reminds viewers that the program is not about gay issues but about the relationship between a man and a woman (Natale 33). Through statements such as these, *Will & Grace* is consciously and conscientiously framed as an apolitical comedy about friends rather than a site of a counterhegemonic politics of sexuality.

In an interview with Gail Shister, Mutchnick acknowledges the balancing act that this rhetorical stance demands. Successfully incorporating difference into mainstream popular culture means being accountable to straight and gay audiences and to the larger community—and to “the art of sitcom making” and the for-profit industry of television production (Shister 104). To secure the largest market audience possible, gays need to feel represented, straights must feel included, and the audience needs to laugh. Rhetorical success in this scenario is based on what Sarah Schulman summarizes as a program’s ability to “address [the] emotional need [of Others] to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that meets their need to have their dominance secured” (146). Creating an apolitical stance seems an effective strategy, then. It enables the mainstreaming of gay subjectivity while also creating
distance between the program and a queer political agenda. Just as important to the program's appeal, however, is its comedic structure of "gay bashing."

While actress Mullally asserts that such humor "is built into the show," its effects seem less obvious, as the program entertains an audience with a range of sexual identities and political affiliations (O'Donnell 73). This wide appeal is not surprising, however, considering the complexity of humor as a rhetorical device. Humor can be generated by cognitive incongruity or exaggeration, for instance. Moreover, humor can function as a coping mechanism to relieve the stress created by social conflict, as Sigmund Freud elaborates in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. From this perspective, LGBT audiences might interpret *Will & Grace* as an example of camp that recontextualizes conflict and sociopolitical marginalization. In a broader social sense, the entire program could be understood as a coping mechanism—a means to psychologically alleviate the social conflict surrounding issues of sexuality in this political climate. But humor can also function as a means to secure superiority.

In "How to Look at Television," Theodor Adorno says that one way humor can secure social divisions of power is by treating material conditions of inequity as a matter of perspective:

The heroine shows such an intellectual superiority and high spiritedness that identification with her is invited, and compensation is offered for the inferiority of her position and that of her ilk in the social set-up. Not only is the central character supposed to be very charming, but she wisecracks constantly. In terms of a set pattern of identification, the script implies: "If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. You can cope with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind." In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment . . . [T]his message is hidden only by a style which does not pretend to touch anything serious. (167)

While the apolitical stance of *Will & Grace* invites viewers to identify with a gay protagonist, certainly an important feat, it also uses humor
Producing Containment and invoked difference to mediate that identification with heterosexist, patriarchal, racist, and classist values integral to securing social divisions of power, as I will argue in the following sections.

It’s No Laughing Matter: An Episodic Reading of the Politics of Will & Grace

Will and Grace has its deceptive charms (it feels smart), but it also manages to be rather offensive, claiming to offer realistic portrayals of gay men who, in this case, do little more than call each other “homo” and “queer” while mincing about . . . They’re here, they’re queer, and, gee, aren’t they funny little fags?

—Robert Wilonsky, “Blow Up the Box”

Because several full seasons of Will & Grace have been aired on primetime television, there are far too many episodes to include in an article-length discussion. I will focus primarily on one episode, “My Uncle the Car,” to explore how the program works to simultaneously include—even normalize—gayness and reproduce conservative exploitative logics.

The episode presents three of the main four characters in some sort of trauma. Jack, whose paternity was called into question earlier in the season, has received a postcard from his mother telling him that his father “is a black boy.” Karen literally loses Rosario, her Salvadoran maid, after wagering her in a pool game. And after four years, Grace allows Will to take out of storage and sell a car she inherited after her uncle’s death, only to feel like she has sold the uncle. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres guest stars as Sister Louise, a nun with an entrepreneurial spirit who purchases the car to run a side business out of the church. The various storylines overlap in their exploration of friendship, family, and families of choice; they also rhetorically construct difference and deploy humor in ways that depend on yet elide systemic inequity.

The Politics of Class

Viewers learn early in this episode that Beverly Lesley has hired Rosario to work at his home, unbeknownst to her primary employer, Karen. When the moonlighting is revealed, Karen becomes jealous, hurt, and angry. She questions Lesley’s interference with “one of the most sacred
relationships there is . . . [that between] a woman and her housekeepers,” and confronts Rosario:

Karen: Is he good to you?
Rosario: He lets me wear jeans to work.
Karen: I don’t want to hear all the filthy details. What does he feed you?
Rosario: Subway; the twelve-inch.
Karen: Oh, how could you? I was your world. Are you really going to throw all that away for a twelve-inch sub?

She continues throughout the episode to talk about Rosario as if she were a possession and a fickle employee. Moreover, she sexualizes their relationship through repeated double entendres. Once all of Karen’s fuzzy signals are deconstructed, however, it is clear that she treats Rosario as a domestic servant—a possession to be bought, sold, and wagered. The subversive potential of making obvious these dynamics of class inequity and exploitation is then largely defused. That is, the program uses humor to deflect interrogation of systemic practices by which (1) persons become commodities; (2) laborers produce the means by which owners sustain social privilege; and (3) laborers are theoretically constructed as free to sell their labor and to choose their working conditions.

The exploitative power relations that mediate their employer-employee relationship are made most clear when Karen attempts to ensure Rosario’s labor by wagering possession of her in a game of pool:

Karen: I’ll play you for her.
Lesley: You do not own her, my dear; she’s a person.
Karen: I know damn well what she is. You don’t have to tell me my own maid’s a person. Of course she’s a person. I’ll play you for her.

For Karen, being a domestic laborer does not forfeit one’s personhood, but that personhood does not prevent one human from being owned by another. Lesley underscores this division of power and its class superiority in an assertion of his own: “I won fair and square. Rosario is mine.”

This is not to say that the construction of Rosario as an object and a possession goes unchallenged. Walking into the room to discover that she has been wagered, lost, and won in a game of pool, Rosario says,
“Stop it! You won me in a game of pool? What am I, your prize bull?” Asserting her agency, she denies her status as a possession, separates herself from historically racist discourse that links dark skin to animalism, and quits her job. In addition, however, the scene implies that laborers can choose to walk away from an offensive employer, thus being able to choose their working conditions. While this is true in part, as Rosario can quit her job, doing so will not in fact alter the dehumanizing forces and hierarchical social relations of capitalism.

The reliance on individual power to combat material inequity occurs in other scenes and episodes as well. Specifically, Rosario deploys sarcastic humor to establish a sense of intellectual superiority and independence. In addition to calling her boss a “drunken fool,” for instance, she often ridicules and challenges Karen to verbal spats that, Adorno argues, work to reinscribe the myth that exploitative social relations are a matter of perspective alterable through discourse. Using humor in this way virtually equalizes disparities of power and rhetorically reconfigures power itself as a linguistic force. The material exploitation, antagonisms, and power differentials of class and race that enable Karen to maintain her position of socioeconomic privilege are thus rendered a matter of perspective, alleviated through the sarcastic sparring privileged by the discourse of humor. Sociohistorical realities of a systemic class system that deploys race, sex, and gender to order society are further effaced through the characters of Will and Jack.

An attorney for a successful legal firm, Will represents a dominant cultural image of the well-off, gender-appropriate-in-appearance, professional, white gay man free to travel and consume as he desires. While Jack has more limitations to his spending, as a service industry laborer and aspiring entertainer, he also enjoys a lifestyle much like Will’s—they belong to the same gym, eat at the same restaurants, and live in the same building. Hence, his representation implies that the lifestyle of the upwardly mobile affluent white man can be achieved without actually having the means—a myth that “between 1.65 and 3.3 million impoverished lesbians and gay men in the United States” might wish were actually true (Hennessy 140).

According to Alexandra Chasin and Fred Fejes, the myth of gay affluence can be traced to the 1980s and 1990s, when several advertising firms associated gay identity with higher than average earnings in order to lure corporate clients with the promise of an economically powerful yet “untapped minority market” (Lorch, qtd. in Chasin 32).
The identification of this market brought to the fore the near absence of mainstream businesses that took into consideration particular concerns related to LGBT persons. According to economist M. V. Lee Badgett, however, the image of affluence was produced on erroneous research; the research design typically used was so flawed that “no legitimate economist would ever use it” (25). Essentially, the design ensured the conflation of LGBT subjectivity, in general, with a particular demographic of persons holding yearly subscriptions to mainstream gay magazines. This conflation resulted in the universalization of the upwardly mobile white male subjectivity that subsequent research challenges, presenting evidence that “gay and bisexual men earn from 17 to 28 percent less than similarly qualified heterosexual men” (45).

*Will & Grace* should not be held accountable for failing to represent all the social conditions and types of diversity associated with LGBT persons. But the perpetuation of myths seems counterproductive if a goal is to depict reality and to benefit an LGBT community living in a country where, among other things, federal legislation still allows employees to be fired based on their sexual or gender orientation. The program often privileges such myths, however, just as the discourse between the often “straight acting” Will and the “notorious f-a-g” Jack frequently relies on sexist and heterosexist logics to ensure the humor of gay-bashing jokes. In effect, then, the discourse that dominates the sociosexual relations of power is used to secure the comedic appeal of the program. Analysis of such ideological work can also be traced through the concepts of race and patriarchy as well.

**Producing Racial (In)Difference**

While any number of characters representing racial and ethnic difference are depicted on *Will & Grace*, the only central character of color is Rosario. The absence of recurring LGBT characters of color does not make the program’s discourse any less racialized, however. As Walters asserts in her discussion of the program, the narrative tends to create “a world of well-dressed white gay men in which both lesbians and gays of color are introduced fleetingly and as objects of derision” (103, 110). Thus, “My Uncle the Car” is a particularly noteworthy episode because it includes race as an integral line of narrative inquiry. This inclusion is troubling and intriguing, however, for Jack is not really black, and allusions stand in for knowledge of race.
The storyline revolves around Jack's paternity. According to a postcard from his mother, who is away on a cruise, his "father is a black boy."

Will: Your father is a black boy?
Grace: They have coconut shrimp [on the ship]?
Jack: I'm black. I'm black and my mother says black boy. I'm black and my mother's a racist.
Will: I totally see it. Jack's black. I don't know why I've never seen it before. I salute you, my proud black brother.
Jack: Thank you, Will. It's nice to have your support. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find out what it means to be black like me.

To readers who remember the episode in which Jack ridiculed one of his sexual partners, saying about the Asian man, "Look how funny he talks," it may come as a surprise that Jack recognizes his mother's racism. But he does. Moreover, he presents it as a line of discussion. But his inquiry is deflected when Grace simply ignores the issue and Will makes a joke implying the absurdity of the situation. It is this sense of the absurd and the exaggerated that works as the comedic structure of this particular storyline and delimits exploration into the material effects of race.

Certainly, a common approach to creating humor is exaggeration. In fact, in many ways, Jack's character is based on this device, as he is eccentric and prone to dramatic monologue. The sense of the absurd in this particular scenario is troublesome, however, for it suggests that the audience should not take seriously the narrative, its underlying assumptions, or its ideological effects. As Adorno suggests, while humor may create laughter and appear to be anything but serious, it is meaningful, as are its implications for how we see the world. In this case, then, it also important to consider how the deployment of a race-d figure (even when figurative) works to construct whiteness. I believe that it is possible to interpret the black Jack as a figure who secures whiteness as an ideological, material, and narrative construct.

By establishing the possibility that Jack is black, the narrative calls into question race as a construct of social ordering—that is to say, if "looking" white does not mean that someone is white, then race is more difficult to identify and deploy. While this may be true, Jack suggests that cultural knowledge can be used to establish racial subjectivity, as we see in his repeated allusions to black culture. Take his
Danielle Mitchell

final phrase in the above exchange, for example. It resonates with the title of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1959). After medically altering his skin color so that he would appear black, Griffin traveled through the South to chronicle the oppression and exploitation created by systemic white supremacist ideology. Jack's use of this allusion creates an intertextual link to an important cultural artifact that revealed the brutal realities of race in U.S. culture. But for Jack, exploring what it might mean to be black stops at allusions. The realities of race within U.S. culture or LGBT politics remain invisible.

Jack's use of allusion and his complicity in the perpetuation of racist discourse continue throughout the episode. In a later discussion with Karen, she asserts, "I'm happy for you, and I'm happy for me; I've always wanted a black friend." Karen uses perhaps one of the most stereotypical measures used to determine one's ideological position on race—whether a person has black friends. While doing so, she illustrates the white-centric nature of both her life and the program. Moreover, she constructs race as a tokenized identity—something to collect—and then celebrates her possession of just such a token. Jack responds with another literary reference: "I finally found my roots, Kar. It's like, my whole life, I've been waiting to exhale." Alluding to Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* enables Jack to continue constructing his black subjectivity as a matter of culture, to make an artifact of black culture visible without confronting Karen's racist logic, and to continue eliding material issues of inequity.

Jack comes the closest to depicting realities of race in his penultimate appearance:

Jack: Something must be done . . . I just stood in the freezing cold for forty minutes trying to get a cab. I finally had to walk halfway 'cross town.'

Grace: Why couldn't you get a cab?

Jack: Why do you think? Because I'm black.

Grace: Maybe you should go down to Boy Bar and try to get a little affirmative action.

While significant social issues underlie this scene, we are reminded that neither Jack nor the narrative can be taken seriously. The framework of exaggeration is exacerbated by the eccentric nature of Jack's personality, and his understanding of "affirmative action" may very
well be limited to the action of psychosexual affirmation. Further, the narrative resecures Jack's subject position as a white man:

Jack: Well, I'm devastated. I talked to mother last night and it turns out I'm not black... I'm a Black; she got knocked up by one of the Black boys, an Irish-Catholic family from her hometown.

If deploying images of the black subject works to construct whiteness, as Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*, Jack seems to consolidate that position and to further occlude the realities associated with being black or a gay black man.

**The Perpetuation of Patriarchy**

While patriarchal values can be traced in myriad ways, I will focus here on the program's relationship to lesbianism, a nearly invisible subject position on the program. This may seem ironic given DeGeneres's guest appearance in this episode. In addition to the significant effort exerted to create ideological distance between *Will & Grace* and her person, politics, and show, she is one the United States' most visible and identifiable lesbians. Nonetheless, lesbians are more frequently invoked than embodied on the program. Additionally, when representations are present, they tend to marginalize lesbian subjectivity and reproduce phallocentricism. This delimited representation of sexual difference that attends primarily to males, intended or not, functions to sustain a pattern of patriarchal ideology that has plagued the LGBT community for some time.11

After Grace regrets selling her uncle's car, she and Will visit Sister Louise to buy it back. During conversation, Grace points out Sister Louise's figurative (hetero)sexuality, as she is bound through marriage to a figure typically sexed male: "it is so wonderful that you're married to God. Me—I'm still looking." The narrative's construction of Louise's heterosexuality is rendered odd because it is difficult to separate the flesh-and-blood lesbian icon of Ellen from the character she is portraying, however.12 This difficulty is increased when Louise asks Grace and Will, "What's sex with a man like?" Certainly, her lack of knowledge could be attributed to the celibacy of a nun's figurative marriage. But double meanings are also possible, and the resultant cognitive dissonance generates humor. Unlike the gay bashing that creates
laughter because it gels with stereotypical constructions and enables guilt-free expressions of homophobia because they are expressed through the mouths of gay figures, Ellen as a nun produces humor through incongruity. But this reading is possible only through the conflation of the fictional character and the flesh-and-blood actress. Thus, her sexual difference is invoked rather than fully played out in the narrative.

Other episodes do break the pattern of near invisibility. Rosie O’Donnell portrays the lesbian mother of Jack’s son in one episode, for instance, and lesbians figure prominently in another about police sensitivity training. These images are interesting not only because they move beyond invocation to representation, but because they also seem to exist as opposites: O’Donnell is a loving mother of a well-adjusted son, whereas the other women are utterly unmotherly, “old-time dumpy, flannel-shirted stereotypes ... the objects of derision from Jack’s acid tongue” (Walters 111). But both representations rely on patriarchal logic; the women are constructed in relation to a feminine standard by which they are either mothers or dykes who abandon motherhood, men, and all connections to femininity.

Lori Kaye specifically asks Mutchnick to account for how Jack “verbally danced on [the] heads” of the flannel-clad women in “Where Are the Funny Girls?” (2). How, she wonders, does his desire to be mindful of the movement’s cause and to represent the “truth,” including the “kind of internal prejudices and oppressions that go back and forth between gay men and gay women” (2), correspond to the stereotypical representations of lesbianism in this episode? To his credit, Mutchnick admits making a mistake during the editing stages of production by removing the contextual information that would have explained Jack’s virulent hatred of the women. The presence of such context may help to explain the dynamic between Jack and a couple of lesbian women in this single scene, in this single episode. To wit, Mutchnick is re-editing the show for syndication, explaining more clearly that it is “Jack’s issue with these two women” that creates the tension (2). But by addressing the tension revealed in and created by this episode as if it exists only between Jack and the women, Mutchnick delimits interpretation to a dynamics of the interpersonal and to the level of the fictional narrative. Thus, attention is deflected from the real and well-documented political conflicts between gay men and lesbians.
Perhaps one could suggest that recourse to authorial intention should not be questioned: Mutchnick is simply explaining what he intended to do in an episode about another subject entirely. Relying on authorial intention ignores the role of the unconscious, however—the level at which ideology mediates thought and shapes the very representations that writers construct—and privileges intention over ideological implications and material effects. As a result, how the program functions to perpetuate ideologies of race, sex, and class would remain concealed, as would the program’s larger role in containing the oppositional power of difference.

Containing Difference: The Function of Inclusion on Will & Grace

We’re here, we’re straight, get used to it.
—Nathan (Woody Harrelson), Will & Grace

In The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault discusses a historical process through which sexuality becomes a subject position, an integral aspect of personal identity and social identification—a material and metaphysical position that subjects are disciplined to inhabit. While acknowledging the role of legal and physical force, he asserts discourse functions as the means through which power is exercised to produce and order society and its bodies. Through discourse, truth and knowledge are distributed, contested, and maintained. It is partially through discourse that subjects are produced and held accountable to this knowledge. And it is through the production of discourse that the cultural artifact of Will & Grace enacts a form of power to affect social relations and to create social change. Even with its progressive features, however, I believe that the program can be understood as a site of incorporation that contains transformative social change.

To be clear, as a multifaceted cultural artifact, Will & Grace is neither wholly subversive of nor entirely complicit in hegemonic relations of power. Rather, like the larger culture in which it is produced, the program is a site of contradiction, a site of ideological contest in which values, practices, and social norms are enacted, challenged, and negotiated. The program challenges the industry’s tendency to construct heterosexuality as the primetime norm through its characters and storylines, for instance. But the program’s inclusion of gay identity
Danielle Mitchell does not perforce produce antiracist, antisexist, or antiheterosexist counterknowledges that will alter inequitable social conditions. In fact, the inclusion of sexual difference may enable the program to more effectively secure systemic social inequity because it appears progressive. Raymond Williams refers to the process through which ideas that seem to challenge dominant social practices and values come to reproduce hegemonic relations as incorporation.

Social change is a dynamic process of negotiation through which residual formations and emergent knowledges collide, forcing changes to values and practices that affect individuals and larger cultural systems. By way of definition, a residual formation “has been effectively formed in the past, but is still . . . an effective element of the present” (Williams 122). Heterosexism, for instance, is not an archaic ideology that has been rendered obsolete, but a residual one; it is an element produced in the past that remains an active and effective social force. On the other hand, emergent formations are “new meanings and values, new practices, and new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are continually being created” (123). But emergent formations are not necessarily counterhegemonic. Residual formations can actually absorb or incorporate the emergent, redirecting their oppositional power. Thus, while some artifacts appear to offer “recognition, acknowledgment, and thus a form of acceptance” through their inclusion of difference, they may actually work to secure a “new phase of the dominant culture” (123, 125).

*Will & Grace* is a site of such incorporation. As I argued in previous sections, it pushes the envelope while also including gay subjects who are least likely to offend audiences, constructing oppressive conditions as a matter of perspective, and articulating gayness through, not in opposition to, heteronormative, racist, sexist ideologies. Securing exploitative logics integral to systemic inequity, the program directs and manages social change such that oppression is actually reproduced through the inclusion of difference and the expansion of acceptable relationships. When the incorporation of oppositional forces is cloaked in a veil of liberal tolerance in this way, it appears to be a form of progressive social change. And this is the upshot of the rhetoric of incorporation upon which the program depends: it persuades us to consent to the perpetuation of oppressive ideologies and to the containment of transformative social change because they are made to appear as something else.
While this article addresses a single television program, attempting to understand its ideological import, the rhetoric of incorporation may provide an analytical concept for understanding other cultural sites of inclusion and sociopolitical efforts to secure rights for LGBT persons as well. It is only through a complex understanding of the contradictions that inhere in sites such as *Will & Grace* or same-sex marriage or schools for LGBT youth that we can hope to create a progressive politics that will create transformative social change.

NOTES

1. The program and several of its actors have received Emmy awards. And after its first season, GLAAD honored *Will & Grace* as the “best comedy for portrayals of gays.” For weekly ratings, see Durfee.

2. As many critics have noted, the program’s ability to overtly represent gayness and gay subjects owes much to the groundbreaking efforts of previous television programs. For more on this history, see Walters; Smith; and Holleran (“Brief History”).

3. Perhaps the most significant exception was the cast’s December 8, 2002, appearance in a political advertisement urging viewers to vote against the Knight Initiative, a ballot item that would prevent (at the state level) the passage of antidiscrimination laws intended to protect the rights of LGBT persons and families.

4. This is not to suggest that those involved with *Will & Grace* fail to acknowledge the debt that they owe to DeGeneres and *Ellen* for providing a blatant and sympathetic representation of emerging lesbian sexuality.

5. The issue of profit cannot be underestimated. Lifetime arranged a syndication deal in 2000, for instance, that guaranteed a fee of $600,000 per half hour of *Will & Grace* aired on the channel. WGN has also begun syndication.

6. Narratives dependent on master, familial, and lover motifs are repeatedly used to characterize the relationship between these two women. Other episodes reveal, for instance, that they have been together for over a decade; that Karen’s daily duties (like getting out of bed) would be nigh impossible were it not for Rosario; that they have shared a bath at least once; that they celebrate the anniversary of their relationship; that Karen is willing to have Rosario arrested to save herself from prosecution for smuggling items into the country; and that Karen is willing to go to great lengths to keep Rosario in her employ, including having Jack marry Rosario in order to protect her from the INS.

7. Cf. Altman; Evans; Chauncey; Lukenbill; Vaid; Peñaloza; and Escoffier for more extensive analyses of the link between consumerism and the development of gay and lesbian identity, community, and market power.

8. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which was before Congress at the writing of this article (2002), still has not passed. If passed, lesbians and gays will enjoy federal protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation in public sector employment. In the absence of such federal protections, some states and localities have created their own legislative protections.

9. Gregory Hines did become a recurring character, playing Grace’s boyfriend for a short time as well as Will’s boss.

10. Delroy Constantine-Simms’s *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line*, Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, and Urvashi Vaid’s
Virtual Equality, among others, discuss the relationships between race and sexuality and how they impact LGBT politics.

11. Although it is beyond the scope of my focus in this section, the linking of Will and Jack to womanhood seems worthy of further attention, as does the dynamic between Grace and Will—both lines of inquiry may reveal important details about the patriarchal practices and the construction of Otherness. For more on the tensions between lesbian and gay politics, see Echols; Moraga and Anzaldua; D’Emilio; and Jay and Young.

12. Michael Freeman, Craig Chester, and Michael Lipton each suggest that the dynamics of invoking gayness is a larger programmatic trope as well, as Will is played by a self-declared heterosexual male. While the show is about a gay man and his friends, they suggest that you can play a gay character but not actually do so as a gay man (much speculation surrounds the sexuality of Sean Hayes, as he refuses to self-identify as either gay or straight). In this regard, the show delimits gayness to the imaginary while overtly attempting to embody it as real.

13. This device is also used with Sandra Bernhard’s guest appearances as well. And implied lesbianism is also evident in the increasing number of same-sex kisses on the program that are framed to present a same-sex kiss while also emptying the act of erotic connotations. One encounter between Karen and Grace is framed as a role-play event, for instance, as a strategy to help Grace achieve closure after Nathan breaks off their relationship. Their kiss is only a virtual representation of same-sex desire. In other words, the context of the show underscores heterosexuality even while it shows two women kissing because Karen inhabits Nathan’s subject position. See Cottingham’s Lesbians Are So Chic . . . That We Are Not Really Lesbians at All for further discussion of such strategies.

Works Cited


Cottingham, Laura. Lesbians Are So Chic . . . That We Are Not Really Lesbians at All. New York: Cassell, 1996.


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