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Abstract

Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm holds that human beings are storytellers who understand the world around them through the use of stories, which inform processes of narrative rationality. This thesis explores the role that televised narratives play in the process of narrative rationality, particularly in their ability to influence societal perception of non-binary conforming sexual orientations. Televised narratives have played a key role in the growing acceptance of homosexuality in popular culture, but that same level of acceptance is not yet afforded to bisexuality. Case studies of Nolan Ross from Revenge, Piper Chapman from Orange is the New Black, and Sarah and Ali Pfefferman from Transparent provide examples of the types of bisexuality narratives present on television today, and illustrate how narratives are evolving to encompass a more fluid conception of sexuality and encourage acceptance of bisexuality in popular culture.
Chapter 1 – In Search of an AliBI

“Bisexual - The often overlooked B in LGBT. A person capable of romantic and sexual attraction towards a partner of either gender. A person twice as likely to be turned down for a date on Saturday night. Someone who has to prove to the heteros that he is not gay, and prove to the homos that he is not straight. A trait hetero men find extremely attractive in women and seem to find frightening in men.”

~Urban Dictionary user Bisexual Yankee Geek¹

Introduction

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Obergefell v. Hodges for marriage equality nationwide. The decision was a long time in the making and a far cry from the days of 1967’s Loving v. Virginia when even interracial marriage was a point of contention among the masses.² While many would contend that the fight for true equality will never be over, one thing that these court cases certainly illustrate is that society is progressing toward equality.

² Anthony M. Kennedy, Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health (Supreme Court of the United States 2015); Earl Warren, Loving v. Virginia (Supreme Court of the United States 1967).
For those in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) population and other marginalized groups, visibility in popular culture has gone a long way toward helping to foster an environment of acceptance and support. Author Stephen Tropiano, though crediting the first gay series regular to ABC’s 1972 sitcom *The Corner Bar*, attributes the true “opening [of] the prime time closet door” to Ellen DeGeneres and her April 1997 revelation of both her real life homosexuality and that of her character Ellen Morgan on the sitcom *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998).³ According to Tropiano, DeGeneres paved the way for what would prove to be an era of remarkable growth in the representation of homosexuality in popular culture. Despite its influential nature, however, the depiction of homosexuality on *Ellen* is one that provides what Valerie Peterson calls an “essentialist” portrayal of homosexuality, confining Ellen’s character to a version of lesbianism that is marked by strict adherence both to binaries of sexuality and to what is deemed acceptable in primetime television culture.⁴ These portrayals are good for visibility, as they render the subject unthreatening to dominant heterosexual ideologies, but are by nature incapable of allowing for depictions that challenge existing preconceptions.

Subsequent series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003), *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006), and *Dawson’s Creek* (WB, 1998-2003) began to include characters and plot lines that featured homosexuality in more prominent roles than ever before. While these earlier shows often still fall into the trap of

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relegating homosexual characters to supporting roles and heteronormative portrayals, they were undoubtedly a significant step on the road to the representation we see on television today. Current mainstream television programs like *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present), *Glee* (FOX, 2009-2015), and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) all present us with examples of gay and lesbian characters who enjoy a similar range of character functions as those with heterosexual orientations, experiencing both more extensive character development and more well-integrated storylines than ever before. With the 2015-2016 season counting nearly 300 recurring or regular LGBT characters in the ranks of broadcast, cable, and streaming television,\(^5\) things have changed significantly since the days when Ellen DeGeneres’s revelation of her and her character’s homosexuality was a source of endless media scrutiny.

Narrative theory attempts to explain, at least in part, how such change happens and what role the narratives play in that change. Theoretical perspectives on narrative and its place in human communication may vary, but all are concerned with the role that narrative plays in the process of understanding and decision-making. For example, one could argue based on the general principles of narrative theory that the change in perspective on marriage equality is merely a result of society gradually incorporating additional philosophies of marriage into the overall narrative that informs our decision making process. The narrative evolves over time, and as a result, we are able to understand and accept things that seemed inexplicable in the past.

It has been well documented that mainstream media has the potential to facilitate attitude change toward individuals or groups of people with whom we are less familiar, including those in the LGBT population. While this idea has been examined in a variety of contexts, the television series is one that is especially significant in the exploration of how narratives have an impact on social change.

One particular study, conducted by Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes, investigates the influence of shows like *Will & Grace* on the attitudes of viewers toward gay characters. They find that not only does prejudice toward homosexuals decrease as the frequency of exposure to characters such as those on *Will & Grace* increases but also that the decrease in prejudice is greatest in those who have the least regular interaction with real life homosexuals. Additionally, Calzo and Ward examine the effects of regular mainstream media exposure on attitudes of acceptance of homosexuality but with a twist: they explore those effects in relation to the

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7 Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? ‘Will & Grace’ and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis.”
demographic variables of gender, ethnicity, and religious involvement and also structure the study to account for exposure to a variety of different perspectives (including both positive and negative portrayals, as one would encounter in real life media exposure) of homosexuality. Largely, their findings are extremely genre specific and vary based on the demographic group of the participants as well. There is some correlation between regular media use and attitudes toward homosexuality. The direction of that correlation, however, is heavily dependent on the type of media being consumed (which itself tends to vary based on demographic categories) and what types of portrayals are generally included in that genre. This further supports the premise that exposure to mainstream media not only has the potential to affect attitudes toward homosexuality but also further validates the importance of the type of portrayal.

Televised narratives clearly play a role in facilitating social change, as is evidenced by the numerous studies supporting the interconnectedness of popular culture and societal attitudes toward homosexuality. What has not yet been explored, however, is what happens when television shows attempt to portray a character type that does not have an established, accepted narrative. Such attempts largely result in the misrepresentation and blatant, incorrect stereotyping of the character in question. Where homosexuality in popular culture is becoming more visible and accepted almost by the day, bisexuality still exists largely on the fringes with regard to both representation and scholarship concerning the influence of that representation on levels of acceptance. In this project, I use narrative theory to examine existing

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8 Calzo and Ward, “Media Exposure and Viewers’ Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Evidence for Mainstreaming or Resonance?”
portrayals of bisexual characters on television and explore how their respective narratives contribute to an overall image of bisexuality.

**Bisexuality: What is it... really?**

In the simplest of terms, heterosexual people are attracted to individuals of the opposite sex, homosexual people to individuals of the same sex, and bisexual people to individuals of both sexes. Quickly, however, the idea gets much more complex. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) provides a perfect illustration of that complexity with its most current published definition of bisexuality. The HRC defines the word bisexual as: “a person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.” From that alone, it is easy to see that things are not as straightforward as they might initially seem. Bisexuality, by its very definition, does not fit neatly into the more well-established (and more accepted) heterosexuality and homosexuality binary. Instead, bisexuality implies a more fluid conceptualization that challenges ideas of sexuality as a binary distinction. This binary-defying fluidity is something that has prompted much research and discussion over the years, as scholars have attempted to tame and define bisexuality for the masses.

As far back as the early 1900s and the writings of Sigmund Freud and Henry Havelock Ellis, bisexuality was frequently discussed in relation to the physiological

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condition of hermaphroditism and often considered to be the result of the combination of male and female characteristics within a single human being. Though Freud ultimately rejected the idea that bisexuality was a result of either physiological or psychical hermaphroditism (yet he was certain that it existed even if he could not point to a cause), it was undoubtedly a commonly held and often debated belief of the time. Ellis likewise noted that “the bisexual group is found to introduce uncertainty and doubt” into the task of trying to classify people in terms of sexuality. He eventually concluded that it was more trouble than it was worth and abandoned his quest to classify sexual orientation altogether.

Scholarship on bisexuality only becomes more complex in the years following Freud and Ellis. Different perspectives on what exactly bisexuality is and how it happens were and still are abundant and varied. For example, Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Stekel, whose work was first published in English in 1922, claimed that everyone is bisexual to some degree with “monosexuality” (meaning either pure heterosexuality or pure homosexuality) being the truly abnormal classification. By the middle of the twentieth century, this idea had coalesced somewhat with the work of Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues, who developed what is known as The Kinsey Scale. In contrast to Stekel’s view that there are no

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absolutes, Kinsey’s research proposed that there are ends to what is essentially a spectrum, running the gamut from purely heterosexual to purely homosexual with everyone else (signifying those we might place somewhere in the bisexual category, though Kinsey himself actually failed to call it that) falling at various points in the middle.  

In the nearly 70 years since Kinsey and his sexual orientation scale appeared on the scene, many scholars have tried and failed to bring about any sort of widespread agreement on or acceptance of the concept of bisexuality. Though bisexuality is arguably more widely acknowledged and at the very least more studied now than in Kinsey’s time, societal attitudes still largely regard varying sexual orientation only as a binary designation. Despite overall progress toward acceptance of the homosexual orientation, bisexuality is often regarded as either a transitory state between the two extremes (with the individual in question on a journey from straight to gay or vice versa) or as a temporary state of confusion and indecision that will eventually end in one or the other. The problem with this binary is expressed most eloquently by Maria San Filippo, who summarizes the heart of the issue when she notes that “Homonormativity is thus complicit in compulsory monosexuality – the ideological and institutionalized privileging of either heterosexuality or homosexuality as the two options for mature sexuality that are

socially recognized and perceived as personally sustainable." In essence, the significant progress that has been made toward societal acceptance of homosexuality has done more to call into question the legitimacy of bisexuality than to support it as a viable and acceptable part of the whole.

Perhaps more troubling than the disagreement on how to define and situate bisexuality is the backlash often directed toward bisexuals from within the larger LGBT community. Controversy over the very existence of bisexuality as a legitimate and permanent sexual orientation has historically resulted in negative responses to bisexual individuals from others within the LGBT community under the misguided notion that the existence of bisexuality undermines their fight for equal rights. This animosity is a subject that is particularly well documented by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor in *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality.* While the majority of the book is dedicated to the exploration and explanation of the nature of bisexuality, there is a shorter but no less significant section devoted to a summary of the internal repercussions experienced by those who identify as bisexual. It reads, in part, as follows:

Both gays and lesbians claimed that those who adopted the label "bisexual" did so because they feared the stigma attached to defining themselves as "gay" or "lesbian." Additionally, gays and lesbians saw bisexuality as a transition to becoming homosexual. In other words,

they often rejected the bisexual identity in and of itself. Such attacks were said to come especially from politically active homosexuals who deplored the political fragmentation they saw caused by bisexuals who refused to fight the common enemy of "heterosexism." Bisexuals could exercise "heterosexual privilege"—i.e., they could always revert to a comfortable identity rather than suffer the consequences of standing up for their gay rights. These beliefs affected personal interactions between bisexuals and homosexuals. Bisexuals were accused of being unable to sustain longterm relationships because of their continued desire for and contact with the opposite sex. This criticism was particularly voiced by homosexual women, who complained that they had to compete with men over their female lovers. It was especially anathema to lesbian feminists, who saw any female heterosexuality as "sleeping with the enemy." Generally speaking, bisexuality was equated with "promiscuity." As one homosexual man said to us, "Bisexuals are erotic gluttons." This supposition was shared by many gays and lesbians.\(^{17}\)

The controversy is further supported from the opposite side—an actual bisexual perspective—in the writing of Joy Morgenstern, who laments the many myths surrounding bisexuality and ultimately concludes that “the word ‘bisexual’ has been added to the masthead, but we don’t feel truly included or accepted.”\(^{18}\)


obviously animosity on both sides of the equation, which does little to help clarify a concept that is already hazy at best.

Given the general lack of clarity surrounding the concept of bisexuality and its varying levels of acknowledgement and acceptance, it is no surprise that narrative attempts to portray bisexuality appear to reflect some confusion. Bisexuality, with its binary-defying nature, calls for more complexity in narratives that strive to depict bisexual identity. Just as television narratives have proven instrumental in fostering a culture of acceptance for homosexuality, it is imperative that we follow suit with the stories we tell about bisexuality. Further analysis of selected case studies explores existing narratives of bisexuality in an attempt to understand the current disconnection between narrative portrayals and levels of support for the bisexual population. Narrative theory provides us with a structure for how narratives facilitate understanding and decision-making, and it is therefore that lens through which we analyze televised portrayals of bisexuality.

**Narrative Theory: We Narrate, Therefore We Understand**

There are two relevant theoretical approaches when exploring how narratives manifest in and influence our culture. First, Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm speaks directly to the notion that human beings are storytellers who utilize our stories to make sense of the world and then make decisions accordingly. Fisher first introduced the idea of his narrative paradigm in 1984 in an attempt to provide a framework to supplement what he calls the rational world paradigm—a method of
reasoning that relies more specifically on knowledge, truth, and rationality as the basis for decision-making.\textsuperscript{19} Fisher holds that the rational world paradigm, though it has its place among methods of reasoning despite requiring specific technical knowledge of the topic in question, is not the only valid method for making sense of the world and drawing reasonable conclusions. In fact, the rational world paradigm falls short in explaining how everyday decisions get made when there is no scientific reasoning involved.

The narrative paradigm, in contrast, allows for reasoning via the construction of a narrative—a type of reasoning of which all humans are capable simply because we have the capacity for storytelling. We each grow up within a culture where we learn how to understand and interact with the world via lessons that take the form of stories—a background that provides us with the instinctive ability to understand and assess the narratives that we hear. Fisher contends that reasoning in this manner, a concept he calls narrative rationality, is often preferable to more formal logical reasoning simply because anyone can do it. The shared ability of narrative rationality allows for truly democratic decision-making, particularly in areas of public moral argument where as much of the public as possible should be involved in the process.

As Fisher defines narrative rationality, we need only to hear a story and evaluate it for its narrative probability (the coherence of the story) and its narrative fidelity (how well the information in the story rings true to our personal lived

experience) in order to make reasoned judgments based on what we know to be true. There are many factors that go into our instinctive analysis of narrative probability and fidelity (among those, according to Fisher, are “matters of history, biography, culture, and character”), but despite the various influences, all result in the same thing: decision-making based on what he calls “good reasons,” which draw on the knowledge learned from shared narratives but are themselves personal and specific to the particular individual, situation, and type of narrative in question.20 Fisher argues that this method of judgment based on “good reasons” is not only preferable because it is more accessible to the masses but also because it is generally a more accurate model of the way public moral argument already happens.

Fisher uses as his example of public moral argument the case of nuclear warfare, though he also counts issues such as abortion, pornography, and school prayer among those that would fall under the jurisdiction of this type of reasoning. All are examples where scientific, rational world explanations of the concept at hand are insufficient as the sole grounds for decision-making. Whether this insufficiency manifests in a lack of accurate and consistent definitions (as we have seen in the case of bisexuality) or in situations where personal beliefs often pull more weight than scientific facts (as in cases of a religious nature, like school prayer or abortion), what is painfully obvious is that some alternative method of reasoning is not only preferable but absolutely necessary.

While his explanation is much more involved, the essence of Fisher’s position is that issues that are public enough to require decisions from the masses,

20 Ibid., 7.
regarding moral matters, and able to be debated successfully from multiple logical/technical angles cannot be (and in reality are not) decided upon by simple evaluation of fact and weighing of truth. The example comes to mind, as we navigate a presidential election cycle that includes prospective candidates as disparate as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, of the decision-making process involved when voters choose which candidate to support in an election. It is not as simple as the weighing of fact and logic or checking off a list of qualifications to determine who is the best candidate for the job. Instead, we must pay attention to each candidate’s campaign narrative as it plays out in the media, existing as a collaboration of smaller stories about relevant issues (which can and should include those that provide us with necessary logical or technical expertise). We must then evaluate each part of the whole for its narrative probability and fidelity, so that we (as non-experts with our own specific biographies, cultures, and characters) might arrive at a decision based on our own good reasons.\(^\text{21}\) The winner, more often than not, is the candidate who constructs the most compelling campaign story—the story that is most cohesive and resonates most harmoniously with our own lived experience. I would argue that the often debated acceptability of varying sexual orientations also falls easily within this category of public moral argument as defined by Fisher, as sexuality in general (and bisexuality in particular) continues, just like politics, to defy explanation by solely scientific and rational means. This only serves to elevate the importance of coherent narratives in informing our decision-making process.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 11–15.
Though Fisher has attempted more than once to expand and clarify the narrative paradigm in the years since it was first published, it is still that initial framework that is most applicable in the context of this analysis. One point he makes in the course of his clarifications and expansions, however, is relevant here. In his “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm,” Fisher points out that “the narrative paradigm does not deny the utility of traditional genres…It does insist, however, that regardless of genre, discourse will always tell a story and insofar as it invites an audience to believe it or to act on it, the narrative paradigm and its attendant logic, narrative rationality, are available for interpretation and assessment.” This places the stories that we see played out on television squarely within the reach of analysis through the lens of Fisher’s theory and likewise implies that they do, in fact, have the potential to inform our beliefs and actions.

The second relevant theoretical perspective is actually one that is not strictly communication theory but still works to lend additional weight to the perspective articulated by Fisher’s narrative paradigm. It is a concept put forth by anthropologist Victor Turner (in collaboration with Richard Schechner) that attempts to explain how social dramas and stage dramas interact to facilitate change. While not specifically a theoretical framework for analysis, it is relevant as a diagram for the process in which social dramas (real life narratives) interact with stage dramas (fictional dramatic narratives) in a feedback loop, each informing and


23 Fisher, “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm,” 56.
influencing the other indefinitely.\textsuperscript{24} It is essentially a pictorial representation of how life imitates art, which imitates life, again providing support for the idea that television narratives have the power to influence individual and public opinion. While Fisher provides us with a mechanism for analysis and judgment of the narratives we encounter, Turner goes further to detail the pattern those judgments follow as they disseminate through society and facilitate change, ultimately looping back to inform a new and improved round of stories and judgments and start the cycle all over again.

\textit{Bisexuality, “As Seen on TV”}

Television is a unique medium, particularly with regard to the study of narrative. Unlike movies, which are similar in presentation but severely limited due to time constraints, television series have the potential to span multiple seasons and, consequently, have a much larger capacity for character and narrative development. This is particularly beneficial when a show attempts to include the arc necessary to develop the narrative of a bisexual character, since bisexuality requires the portrayal of diverse romantic/sexual encounters and generally cannot be done both well and quickly. Television is also unique in another respect, one that is discussed in detail by Maanvi Singh: the characters and their stories come to us rather than the other way around. All we have to do is tune in once a week, and the characters from our favorite shows—characters who over time often seem like peripheral additions to

our real life circle of friends—come to visit us at home in a space where we are
surrounded by the comfort of the familiar and more receptive to ideas that might be
different from our daily reality. It is a relatively risk-free method of exposing
ourselves to types of people whom we might not otherwise encounter, and it can
result in actual positive attitude change. Singh goes on, however, to warn that
research shows the change can go both ways. Stereotypical, simplistic character
portrayals can do just as much to reinforce negative attitudes as the positive
portrayals do to encourage attitude change.25

In the case of bisexual characters, we quickly run into issues with both
accessibility of characters and the type of portrayal involved. To begin with,
bisexual characters are far fewer in number than either gay or lesbian characters,
despite the fact that GLAAD’s 2014 annual “Where We Are on TV” report shows a
significant increase—from 12 in the 2010-11 season to 43 in the 2014-15 season—
in representation on television in the last five years, particularly on paid cable
networks.26 It is also significant to note here that the same GLAAD television report
for the current season (2015-16) cautions that while the technical qualifications to
classify a character as bisexual may be met, many of them still fall prey to the
stereotypical myths associated with bisexuality while still others present little more

25 Maanvi Singh, “How Shows Like ‘Will & Grace’ and ‘Black-Ish’ Can Change Your
Brain,” NPR.org, August 31, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/08/31/432294253/how-shows-like-will-grace-
and-black-ish-can-change-your-brain.
2014-WWAT.pdf.
than a flirtation with bisexuality as a plot device before reverting back to business as usual.\textsuperscript{27}

There is also the occasional character portrayal that appears at first to be full of promise. One such character was the self-identified bisexual Tila Tequila on MTV’s \textit{A Shot at Love}, a reality dating show centered on the premise that Tila is bisexual, with a group of 16 (labeled and marketed as “straight”) men and 16 (labeled and marketed as “lesbian”) women competing for her affections.\textsuperscript{28} As it is a reality show, and Tila actually identifies as bisexual, the problem here is more related to the structure of the show than Tila herself. She is largely presented, despite the bisexual label, with the narrative of someone trying to decide between the binary designations of straight or lesbian. This results in what Maria San Filippo terms a “missed moment”—the initial idea is intriguing, but its execution far from adequate, and ultimately reinforces traditional gender binaries and ideas of monosexuality.\textsuperscript{29} Rather than a well-rounded and realistic bisexual character portrayal, both Tila’s show and her character quickly devolved into little more than a media spectacle, leaving the audience less than satisfied with the image of bisexuality she supposedly set out to portray. Tila is just one example of the abundant missed opportunities found in both characters and show premises that at first seem to promise a thoughtful portrayal of bisexuality. It is far more difficult to

\textsuperscript{27} GLAAD, “Where We Are On TV 2015,” 26.
\textsuperscript{29} San Filippo, \textit{The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television}. 
find truly well developed and consistent portrayals of characters who identify as bisexual, and even then the narratives surrounding them still vary greatly.

Well, now what?

This study explores the televised narratives of bisexual characters through the lens of narrative theory in an attempt to understand how these narratives help to shape the larger cultural concept of bisexuality. In addition to the introduction, justification, and theoretical perspective detailed within this chapter, the subsequent chapters each consist of in-depth case studies of the narratives of three more well-established, bisexual television characters. For the sake of providing a sample of different contemporary character portrayals, cases were selected that have all aired within the last five years, feature characters that fall within a younger adult age range, and represent three considerably different television networks, each of which has its own reputation and conventions that may influence the type of character portrayal it allows. While each of the three selected characters qualifies as bisexual (either through self-identification as such or through a demonstrated orientation toward both male and female romantic interests), each performs bisexuality in his or her own way and invites critical analysis from a slightly different perspective. Chapter Two features the character of Nolan Ross (played by Gabriel Mann) on ABC’s Revenge (2011-2015). Through Nolan, I examine a character that, despite being a charismatic and intriguing character, still consistently falls prey to negative stereotypes commonly associated with bisexuality. Chapter Three contains an
analysis of Piper Chapman (played by Taylor Shilling) from Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black* (2013-Present), who experiences the struggle of bisexual characters who are forced to operate within the rigid (and in her case literally punitive) structure of a society that either cannot or will not accept the fluid nature of a bisexual orientation. Chapter Four explores the narratives of Sarah and Ali Pfefferman (played by Amy Landecker and Gaby Hoffman, respectively), two bisexual characters in the Amazon Original Series *Transparent* (2014-Present), which is a show that is beginning to explore what bisexuality looks like in a post-binary context. I then conclude with a fifth chapter that presents a discussion of overall findings and considers how narratives such as these work together within the framework provided by narrative theory to advance societal characterizations of bisexuality.

It is undoubtedly significant that bisexual characters have made it onto television at all, let alone as principal characters in long running television series. Though Nolan, Piper, Sarah, and Ali are part of a relatively small group of arguably misunderstood characters, they still exist, and in greater company than a mere five seasons ago. That alone is evidence that we are attempting to include bisexuality in the overarching narrative of sexual orientation and inclusion. Presence, however, is not enough. It is also necessary to strive for accurate representation, or we merely encounter stereotypical portrayals with the potential to do more harm than good. Narratives have power and are clearly influential over time, particularly when given the visibility provided by the medium of mainstream television.
Relatively coherent narratives already exist for straight, gay, and lesbian characters, but as accepting as society has become of those character types in recent years, we still simply are not equipped to handle bisexuality in any but the most specific of situations. It is only through careful analysis and thoughtful study of the existing problematic narratives that we can ever hope to move beyond the confusion and begin to tell better stories. Narrative theory tells us that it’s crucial to develop a coherent narrative in order for bisexuality to ever be truly understood. With ability to construct and internalize a coherent story, however, there is hope for future understanding and acceptance.
Chapter 2 – *Revenge*

“Back in the day I was dating this guy. It was casual, fun. Then I met
his sister…and she was more casual, more fun…”

~ Nolan Ross\(^{30}\)

*Introduction*

When *Revenge* premiered on ABC in 2011, the number of bisexual characters
on all of television barely crossed in double digits.\(^{31}\) Despite a myriad of gay and
lesbian characters on television, the lack of bisexual representation remains curious
and troubling. This lack of visibility at the time is significant in two respects. First,
it illustrates the tendency to exclude that which we do not understand. Second, it
results in an extreme level of scrutiny directed at the few existing bisexual
characters. It is within that atmosphere that we first meet Nolan Ross, a character
who is not only labeled as bisexual, but who is also a principal character on a
mainstream primetime series. Nolan represents a level of bisexual visibility on
television that was previously unprecedented, making his character narrative one of
utmost importance.

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Despite the benefits of working with a character that is prominent enough to garner his own storylines, *Revenge* fails to fully develop Nolan’s character in a way that represents an accurate portrayal of bisexuality. More often than not, the narrative defaults to stereotypical portrayals instead, relying on problematic societal preconceptions of bisexuality to build the character rather than tackling the more difficult job of representing bisexuality in all its complexity. These narrative shortcuts result in further confusion of the concept of bisexuality.

Notably, social psychologist Miles Hewstone reports that however stereotypes are directed, whether they diminish difference within a group (as is most often the case with bisexuality, when the characteristics of the few are ascribed to the whole) or accentuate between group differences, stereotypes create misunderstandings because they distort our processing of information about people who belong to a stereotyped group.\(^{32}\) In more extreme cases, stereotyping can even lead to instances of stereotype threat—the anxiety evoked by stereotyping that influences individuals to act in accordance with a negative stereotype that would otherwise be untrue—or the delegitimization of a group entirely, limiting that group’s ability to act with agency and influence society in any meaningful way.\(^{33}\)


When the negative effects of stereotyping are viewed in conjunction with the theories of narrative rationality, what results is a dangerous combination. Within the practice of narrative reasoning, exposure to narratives containing the misconceptions of stereotypes pollutes our entire decision-making process. In the case of Nolan Ross and *Revenge*, this phenomenon is further complicated by the fact that even as Nolan’s narrative is repeatedly characterized by stereotypes of bisexuality, he is also depicted as successful, attractive, sociable, and intelligent—all traits generally regarded as positive and admirable—resulting in an overall portrayal that simultaneously perpetuates inaccuracies and reinforces them through positive association. *Revenge* provides visibility for bisexuality, but that visibility comes at the cost of stereotypical, problematic portrayals that are excused and normalized by the fact that Nolan is a likeable character.

**Series and Character Background**

*Revenge* is a series centered on, fittingly, Emily Thorne’s quest for revenge. Emily Thorne, born Amanda Clarke, is on a mission to avenge the framing and murder of her father, David Clarke. David, a former executive with financial management firm Grayson Global, was an innocent employee set up by the Grayson family and their allies as a scapegoat for a series of illegal terrorist actions associated with the company. David is notorious for the alleged financial backing of a terrorist group claiming responsibility for the crash of Flight 197, which caused the deaths of all 247 individuals on board the aircraft. David’s conviction resulted in
a lifelong prison sentence, and Emily’s belief as the series begins is that her father was murdered in a prison riot shortly before her eighteenth birthday. The series follows Emily (played by Emily VanCamp) as she relocates to the Hamptons in New York and systematically begins to exact vengeance on each of the individuals who aided in the conspiracy to convict her father. She does so with varying levels of assistance from a very exclusive group of trusted friends and allies, including Nolan Ross.

Nolan Ross (played by Gabriel Mann), in spite of her reluctance to fully trust anyone but herself, is Emily’s closest friend and confidant. Nolan plays a significant role in Emily’s world; he is often pivotal in her schemes, either as the only person who knows her true objectives or as the certifiable computer genius whose invaluable hacking skills are necessary for the success of her plans. Their relationship is so integral to the show, in fact, that Nolan is best understood when considered in relation to Emily. She is calculating and single-minded, exclusively focused on how her actions will affect her quest for revenge. Emily is portrayed over and over as cold and manipulative, willing to use anything and anyone (including her loyal friend Nolan) to accomplish her goals.

Nolan’s character, in contrast, is much more likable. Attractive, intelligent, and confident, Nolan is a former teenage prodigy turned self-made eccentric billionaire. We learn 12 episodes into the series that he is Wired’s man of the year and sixth on Forbes’ list of youngest billionaires. Nolan credits his success in large part to the emotional support and financial backing provided to him by

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34 “Infamy,” Revenge (ABC, January 11, 2012).
Emily’s father, David Clarke, at a time when no one else was willing to support him and his unconventional ideas. The resulting post-success Nolan is one who is fiercely loyal to Emily as he attempts to repay David’s kindness. He is willing to do almost anything for Emily, often against his better judgment and at great risk to his personal safety and security. Likely because his instincts about many of Emily’s schemes are right on target, Nolan also spends a great deal of his time playing the role of Emily’s conscience, gently pushing her to think through her every intended action and acknowledge the consequences that could result from her decisions.

Early in the series, Nolan self-identifies as bisexual, establishing a framework with which to read the character and his accompanying traits. In a conversation with another character in episode seven of the first season, Nolan states: “Ambiguous sexual identity. I get it. I’m about a three on the Kinsey Scale myself.”

A three, according Kinsey’s scale, is someone who falls equidistant on the spectrum between the two extremes of heterosexuality and homosexuality, placing Nolan squarely in the category of what we would call bisexuality.

Additionally, we quickly see evidence to back up Nolan’s Kinsey categorization in his dating habits. Over the course of the series, Nolan has numerous serious and casual encounters with both men and women, clearly illustrating that it is possible for a television series to easily identify the boundaries between a character’s platonic and amorous interests.

35 “Charade,” Revenge (ABC, November 2, 2011).
Clear boundaries between friendly and romantic relationships are of utmost importance in relation to bisexual characters. Unlike the case of monosexual characters, where the gender of the other person often limits the potential nature of a relationship, superficial characterization based on gender is actually impossible when a bisexual character is involved. Boundaries must therefore be identifiable through other context clues rather than relying primarily on gender. *Revenge* navigates this smoothly, providing Nolan’s character with easily identifiable relationships in both platonic and sexual categories that allow for audience comparison and contrast. For example, Nolan’s relationships with Emily Thorne and Jack Porter, a mutual friend of both Nolan and Emily, are definitively platonic. Nolan spends countless hours with both Emily and Jack over the course of the series, and never once is it implied that there might be romantic attraction with either of his two friends. In this case, the friendly nature of Nolan’s respective friendships with Emily and Jack is underscored by his role in their romantic relationship with one another. Nolan acts as confidant for each of them as Emily and Jack separately realize that they are destined to be together, and then he encourages them to pursue their feelings despite complications.

On the other side, when Nolan encounters a potential love interest, his behavior immediately signals the possibility of romance. His mannerisms change to indicate attraction, and everything from his tone of voice to his body language is subtly different than in interactions with his friends. Nolan is not afraid to go after what he wants and is utterly clear about his objectives whenever he is interested in someone romantically, either male or female. This is evident in all of Nolan’s
romantic endeavors but particularly in his pursuit of Tyler in season one and Padma in season two. Nolan confidently approaches each of them and makes his intentions evident from the beginning, so that the audience sees no indecision when the narrative focus shifts to one of possible romance. Evidence of such well-defined boundaries is crucial in order to provide an accurate portrayal of bisexuality on screen and avoid audience confusion regarding where a bisexual character stands in relation to the other characters in the series. In spite of this generally positive characterization and overwhelmingly unapologetic attitude concerning his sexual orientation, however, we still see Nolan’s narrative repeatedly fall prey to many of the common stereotypes regarding the nature of bisexuality.

Stereotyped Bisexuality

Joy Morgenstern notes that there are four exceedingly common “myths” surrounding those who identify as bisexual. To paraphrase her more extensive descriptions, these amount to preconceived notions that bisexual individuals are promiscuous, in transition from one sexual orientation to another, outcasts from society, and either confused or indecisive and consequently incapable of being satisfied with their decisions.\(^37\) The term “myth” suggests that none of these stereotypes are universally factual, yet it also implies a weight of societal expectation that is difficult to overcome. Myths in the more traditional sense of the word, such as those of the Ancient Greeks, existed as stories that helped people

make sense of societal structure and natural phenomena, much the same as the role popular culture narratives like those on television play in narrative rationality today. While stereotypes and myths are not technically the same thing, in this case they are intricately related, as Morgenstern’s “myths” manifest from cultural stereotypes. The tendency to default to a stereotype, rather than take the time to fully develop an accurate portrayal of a character, perpetuates inaccuracies rather than helping to correct them. Nolan’s characterization on Revenge falls into this trap repeatedly, touching on not just one or two but all four of Morgenstern’s “Myths of Bisexuality,” as well as harkening back even further to the early 1900s research regarding bisexuality and its possible relation to biological sex and gender.38

Our very first sighting of Nolan Ross in the pilot episode of Revenge provides a startlingly loaded image when viewed with anything more than passing attention. The scene takes place at a party, a Fire and Ice themed soiree celebrating the end of the summer season in the Hamptons and the engagement of our dark heroine Emily Thorne to Daniel Grayson, heir apparent of the family at the heart of her plot for revenge. The Fire and Ice Ball is a formal affair at which the theme for the evening is intended to be symbolic of the collision of opposites and is represented, in part, by the way the party guests dress for the occasion. In this case, all the men wear white tuxedos and all the women wear red formal dresses.39

The one exception, however, is Nolan—who does not adhere to either category. The very first time he appears on camera, in the episode that is designed to set up our expectations for the entirety of the series, Nolan Ross is surrounded by men and women dressed exclusively according to gender, and he has on a dashing combination of both white and red. Nolan is clothed *mostly* in white, as would have been required by the conventions of the occasion if he had adhered to them but with the exception of his jacket, which is the vivid red worn by all the women in the room. This is a boundary crossing gesture that provides subtle commentary on conventions of gender and the dangers of categorization without allowance for fluidity, with Nolan functioning as a bit of a rebel. He becomes the type of person who refuses to be put into a box based on arbitrary guidelines, like those attached to our societal conventions of gender. It becomes problematic, however, when viewed in conjunction with Nolan’s professed bisexuality.

The image of Nolan’s wardrobe choice in the pilot episode provides evidence of two different stereotypes often associated with notions of bisexuality. The first of those is the idea from the days of Freud that sexual orientation, gender, and biological sex are somehow related. While we as an audience have not yet been told of Nolan’s bisexuality, he is unmistakably marked as different from the first frame of footage in which he appears. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the scenes at the Fire and Ice Ball are chronologically situated in the middle of season one, not at the beginning, despite the fact that the party is the first thing we see. What is shown to us first in the pilot episode is staged to provide audiences with a dramatic first look at this world and its inhabitants (including everything from a glamorous
engagement celebration to a mysterious gunshot victim) before rewinding in time several months prior to fill in the backstory. The first time we see Nolan’s unconventional wardrobe choices, we may not know the full complexity of Nolan Ross, but he is immediately tagged as different, and by the time we revisit these same scenes in episode 15, we absolutely do know more. At that point, in light of the fact that Nolan’s only difference from the rest of the crowd at the party is his sexual orientation, the decision to single him out in an environment where everyone else is dressed based on gender is troubling. While perhaps the statement is not as drastic as Freud’s conclusions on the subject—Nolan is not being labeled as a hermaphrodite by dressing him both red and white—the image serves to confuse the complex but wholly distinct concepts of sexual orientation and gender.

Nolan’s wardrobe choice for the evening in which we first encounter his character also signifies another characteristic often inaccurately attributed to those who identify as bisexual: the inability to choose. Even without getting into the more complex notion that his outfit problematically confuses ideas of sexuality and gender, the choice to have Nolan not in compliance with either category of dress for the party comes with the implication that he is unable to decide with which group he belongs. While Nolan’s unwillingness to be governed by rules is admirable when actually viewed as a refusal of categorization, when he is surrounded by an overwhelming majority of people who do seem to fit neatly into groups, he is contrasted as someone who seems either confused or unwilling to make a choice. This imagery is further complicated by the deliberate use of his wardrobe as what

sets Nolan apart from the group. Clothing is by nature impermanent—it can be removed at will and replaced—but sexuality of any type is neither temporary nor interchangeable. Associating the prominent bisexual character with imagery that brands him as atypical, indecisive, and impermanent associates those traits with bisexuality itself by extension. These are all criticisms often leveled at individuals who identify as bisexual, in conjunction with the accusation that bisexual individuals could never be satisfied with the choice to be in any single relationship in the long term.

Closely related to the idea of bisexuality as indecision is the belief that bisexuality is transient, existing only because a person is in the process of changing from heterosexual to homosexual or vice versa. In Nolan’s case, we see this idea come to life in the contrast between the Nolan we see in flashback sequences and the “present day” Nolan, and the difference is amplified when viewed in comparison to the way the simultaneous changes in Emily’s character are depicted. One example of this is included in the pilot episode and shows the day that Emily was released from her stint in juvenile detention and greeted upon exiting the facility by Nolan, who is armed with a box of evidence from Emily’s father and the news that she has rights to nearly half of Nolan’s massive fortune.\(^4\) Only a few years have passed since the depicted flashback scene, but both characters appear drastically different in the flashback sequences versus present day scenes.

Young Emily is dark, both physically and emotionally. Her hair is jet black, as is all of her clothing, and her first encounter with Nolan shows her radiating

\(^4\) “Pilot.”
rage—furious about everything from her father and his alleged crimes to the foster system that has dominated most of her life. Present day Emily is almost unrecognizable in comparison. She has transformed into a blonde, poised socialite who has full mastery of both her life and her emotions. We are aware of her motives and know she still has that dark side hidden under the decorum, but her outer appearance reveals only light, grace, and utter control. Nolan’s transformation is equally drastic, but in a notably different way. Young Nolan is depicted with an arguably more masculine persona than his present day version – still clearly a lovable, loyal nerd, but dressed like a stereotypical “gamer” type, in jeans and t-shirts, awkward, slightly scruffy, and careless in his appearance. Contrarily, present day Nolan is the very definition of metrosexual. He is impeccably stylish, with never so much as a hair out of place, and even his mannerisms are smooth and graceful.

Emily’s changes are easily explained in the context of her revenge plot—she has intentionally altered her appearance to conceal her identity and blend in with the high society social climate of the Hamptons. For Nolan, however, we are provided with essentially no justification for his transformation. While some of this transformation could be explained away with the passage of time and immersion in upper class society life, it appears as though not enough time has passed to account for such drastic change without some underlying catalyst, as is provided with Emily’s character. This misguided attempt to make him look younger has resulted in a much more problematic portrayal. Rather than implying a change in his age, as character presentation in flashback is generally designed to do, what we actually get
is the suggestion that his character has undergone a significant transition from one persona to another. This seems eerily reflective of societal tendencies to regard bisexual individuals as people in transition between the extremes of heterosexuality and homosexuality rather than as individuals with fluid but enduring and legitimate sexual orientation.

In addition to portrayals that confuse his gender and question the permanence of his sexuality, Nolan plays into the misconception that bisexuality is equivalent to promiscuity. He begins early on to use sex as a way to get what he wants from people, an inclination that seems all the more prevalent when it is directed at both men and women. The most notable example of this is in season one when the object of Nolan’s interest is a man named Tyler Barrol. Nolan uses sex with Tyler to blackmail him and then jokes to Emily about doing it again, with the clear implication that not only is he not afraid to sleep around to get what he wants, but he also intends to enjoy it. Enhancing the connection of bisexuality and promiscuity, Tyler also proves to be bisexual, and he is equally as manipulative as Nolan in using his sexuality to his advantage. Tyler toys with Nolan’s affections while simultaneously denying his attraction to men, explaining away the interaction to his girlfriend as a meaningless means to an end, despite the fact that we know that Nolan is not the only man with whom Tyler has been involved.42 Not only does this portrayal further associate bisexuality with promiscuity, but it also implies that Tyler considers his sexuality to be something shameful.

42 “Charade.”
Unfortunately, the promiscuity stereotype does not stop with Nolan’s brief encounter with Tyler. Though Tyler exits the picture long before the end of the first season, his departure only happens after he and Nolan are implicated in a scandal involving a video of their encounter that Nolan recorded without Tyler’s knowledge or consent. While anyone who has watched even a couple of episodes of the show could easily write off the existence of the video as a side effect of Nolan being a paranoid tech genius who monitors and records nearly everything, it still does not bode well for his image that Nolan attempts to use the video as leverage. Nolan threatens to expose Tyler’s sexuality to the Grayson family, a move that would cost Tyler his career, and only fails to follow through with his threats because Emily leaks the video first. Moreover, there are other examples later on in the series of Nolan using a romantic entanglement in an attempt to control a situation (most notably Padma in season two and Patrick in seasons three and four), all of which result in further damage to Nolan’s reputation.

The stereotype here is by far the least subtle of those apparent on the show but possibly the most laden with suggestion, which implies more than a simple association with promiscuity. The tendency to use sex as a tool to gain power is one most often attributed to women and is generally characterized as manipulative. Consider the extreme case of the femme fatale, a female trope common to the genre of film noir. The femme fatale is characterized as a temptress who uses her sexuality for manipulation, often to the total destruction of herself and the (usually male) character with whom she has become entangled. Mary Ann Doane contends that a shift happens when a female character like a femme fatale attempts to use sex to
gain power. According to Doane, this shift results in a female character that is no longer a subject of feminism but rather a manifestation of male fear about feminism.\textsuperscript{43} While sexual agency in women is often hailed as a symbol of progressive feminism, it is notoriously difficult to navigate the boundary between progressive and aggressive and even more difficult in lieu of the lack of control over audience perception of any woman, fictional or not, who embraces and flaunts her sexuality.\textsuperscript{44} The relationship between sexual agency and power is complicated at best, and more often than not, efforts to illustrate that relationship in media play out in a highly offensive manner, as narratives tend to penalize female characters for using their sexuality to their advantage.

Nolan’s use of sex as manipulation is therefore not only an association with promiscuity but also with sexist ideologies. Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, like the problematic binaries often ascribed to sexuality, are not all encompassing of concepts that are more accurately represented by a range of characteristics rather than as distinct and separate categories. Just as Nolan’s bisexuality places him somewhere in between fully homosexual and fully heterosexual, he also represents a persona that is neither fully masculine nor fully feminine—a combination that is not only completely acceptable but also authentic to the way masculinity and femininity play out in the real world. Despite a mixture of personality traits that could be ascribed respectively to masculinity or femininity, however, there is never any doubt that Nolan is a man. He is a man characterized by

\textsuperscript{43} Mary Ann Doane, \textit{Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis} (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2–3.

\textsuperscript{44} Emilie Zaslow, \textit{Feminism, Inc: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture}, vol. First, Book, Whole (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 57–82.
a stereotype common to women, with the implication being that Nolan is not quite manly enough to take charge of a situation without resorting to feminine strategies to gain control. Consequently, those feminine strategies are coded as inferior and offensive to his manhood.

The intersection of sexuality and sexism results in a depiction that is equal parts bewildering and problematic. Nolan simultaneously represents the erroneous equation of bisexuality and promiscuity, the inaccuracy of a compulsory masculine/feminine binary, and the sexist notion that any type of sexual agency (manipulative or otherwise) is by nature more acceptable for men than for women. The sheer complexity of such a character representation threatens the coherence of the narrative—a condition that Fisher’s narrative paradigm deems necessary for the processes of narrative rationality to function.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, even if complexity were not an issue here, inaccuracies and stereotypes are certainly abundant and the inclusion of such misinformation only serves to further perpetuate those stereotypes.

Finally, Nolan provides audiences with an excellent example of the isolation and struggle for acceptance that is all too common to the bisexual population. Nolan acts as the single most dedicated, caring, and consistent friend that Emily Thorne has ever had, despite repeated evidence that she does not deserve that kind of devotion. Entirely out of loyalty to Emily’s father for believing in him, Nolan throws himself wholeheartedly into helping Emily whenever and wherever she needs him with little regard for how her schemes might cost him in the end. And

they do, in fact, cost him something over and over in a variety of different ways. At various points in the course of the series, Nolan is alternately kidnapped, attacked, arrested, held at gunpoint, divested of control of his precious company, and nearly bankrupted—always because of something to do with Emily Thorne and her schemes. Emily repeatedly assures that Nolan comes out ok in the end, but no matter what she puts him through, his loyalty never wavers. His money, his brilliance with computers, and even his love life—Nolan is willing to risk anything for his best friend.

Despite his willingness to sacrifice for her, however, Emily only rarely seems to be truly grateful for Nolan. At best, it is possible to conclude from her repeated reliance on Nolan that she values his help, but she rarely expresses any sincere affection or gratitude for his assistance. She literally turns his life upside down repeatedly, and almost never says so much as thank you. Nolan, consequently, is consistently a man in limbo, desperate for a place to belong, and Emily is far from the only person he goes out of his way to impress. He actually goes as far as to bribe Jack Porter, who owns a local bar, to be his friend in season one and later buys the Hamptons Beach Club just so he can give Jack a place to work that will provide childcare for his son. Nolan even goes through a period of time in season four when he is married to an unstable socialite in a misguided attempt to play savior to someone, partly, it seems, because he feels as though he truly belongs to no one. Though both Jack and Emily actually do seem to care for Nolan, especially near the end of the series when Emily finally retires from her quest for revenge, Nolan never
seems to find a place where he feels accepted for who he is instead of the assets he brings to the table.

No matter how hard he tries, Nolan cannot seem to attain the approval that he is clearly so desperate to find from anyone, especially Emily. While Nolan’s level of commitment to those he considers friends may be admirable, his wanton disregard for his own safety and security suggests a serious lack of self-esteem. His “friends” repeatedly take advantage of him, and Nolan takes the abuse, implying that he is either weak or feels like he deserves such poor treatment. We know from the context of the show that Nolan is decidedly not weak—he consistently proves to be brilliant, daring, and utterly trustworthy, and he regularly demonstrates a healthy level of confidence in many areas, particularly when he is given opportunities to flaunt his intelligence. Yet he still puts up with being treated poorly, particularly by Emily, without complaint.

A clue to the motivation behind Nolan’s willingness to accept mistreatment lies hidden in season three. Nolan has no family, and precious little of his history is ever revealed. The one exception is a brief mention of his father, from whom Nolan was alienated ten years prior, and who is now deceased. While Nolan indicates that he and his father never had a wonderful relationship because they never saw eye-to-eye on Nolan’s obsession with computers, he had finally managed to impress his father with his business success and they were in the process of mending their relationship when the final break happened. The important detail here is not that that Nolan’s relationship with his father was a troubled one but why it ultimately fell apart. It was because of Nolan’s bisexuality, which was disclosed to the general
public by a publicist without his consent.\(^46\) He was outed without the opportunity to warn his father of what was coming, and their relationship never recovered.

Nolan speaks of his estrangement from his father with considerable anger, especially at Bizzy, the publicist responsible for outing him to the public. Bizzy eventually pays the price for her mistakes, but her downfall is not enough to repair the damage done to Nolan. As a direct result of her actions all those years ago, Nolan’s sexuality is inextricably tied to the feeling that he was never good enough. As a result, Nolan puts up with whatever his friends throw at him, regardless of potential risk. This is further complicated for Nolan by Emily and Jack’s seemingly indiscriminate acceptance of Nolan’s sexuality. Among all the other stuff they put him through, Nolan’s sexual orientation is one thing they seem to accept without question when it was exactly the one thing his father could never forgive. It is as if Nolan feels he owes them a debt for that acceptance, and he goes out of his way to compensate in any other way he can.

Nolan’s struggle for acceptance is undeniably reminiscent of a lack of societal acceptance of bisexuality but also is indicative of something more. It implies that Nolan has to work to earn the acceptance of his peers because something about him is broken, and his brokenness is inextricably entwined with his sexual orientation. In the end, even his story is left unfinished. Emily eventually learns that there are more important things in life and happily retires from the revenge game, but Nolan never quite realizes that he is worthwhile and whole just the way he is. Everyone else’s story finds definite closure, and the lone bisexual

\(^{46}\) “Resurgence.”
character is left uncoupled and adrift, still unsure of where he belongs or what he will do next.

Conclusion

On a superficial level, the character of Nolan Ross could be viewed as a positive contribution to the overall narrative of bisexuality in popular culture. He represented an unprecedented level of visibility for a bisexual character on mainstream television at the time *Revenge* aired, and he is attractive, charming, intelligent, confident, and utterly unapologetic about his life choices. Unfortunately, this only makes the stereotypical aspects of his character even more damaging to societal perceptions of bisexuality. A closer look at the nuances of his character portrayal paints a drastically different picture. In spite of all his success and seeming sophistication, we see Nolan at different points in the series depicted as confused, promiscuous, manipulative, indecisive, insecure, and desperate for acceptance. The positive attributes associated with Nolan’s character are offset by his numerous negative characteristics, all of which are tied to his sexuality. He is, in short, a blatant misrepresentation wrapped up in pretty outer packaging, serving only to make the inaccuracies seem authentic by positive association and therefore far more dangerous.

The brilliance of narrative rationality is that it provides a way for individuals on the outside of a narrative to understand the information contained within it by shaping it into a reasonable, relatable, and coherent story. The process
only works, however, if information contained within the story provides audiences with an accurate representation of its subject. Erroneous representations, especially those that seem promising at a glance, are far more likely to perpetuate misconceptions than do anything to correct them and encourage acceptance. While there was potential for Nolan Ross to provide us with an authentic and coherent narrative of bisexuality, in the end, Revenge is unable to deliver on that promise.
Chapter 3 – *Orange is the New Black*

“That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? Rules aren’t any fun.”

~Piper Chapman

*Introduction*

Netflix was founded in 1997 as a mail order DVD rental service. In order to keep up with market demand for instantaneous access to digital media, by 2007 Netflix had launched the direct streaming service that most of us associate with the company name today. In 2013, Netflix began streaming original content, and by the end of the year had released pilot seasons for three original series, including *Orange is the New Black*, and became the first Internet television network to be nominated for (and win) a Primetime Emmy. This alternative to the traditional network influences what is possible and permissible in a narrative. Much the same as paid cable networks like HBO and Showtime, streaming subscription services have a lot of freedom of presentation when it comes to their original series. Free from both the constraints of traditional run times, with no commercials to restrict an hour-long broadcast to 43 minutes, and the censorship of the Federal Communications

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Commission, with no rules on what is allowable for inclusion in civilized television, pretty much anything that plays well to an audience is within reach of the network.

*Orange is the New Black* is known for pushing boundaries, a reputation demonstrated by its status as the first show ever to receive Emmy nominations in both the comedy and drama categories. *Orange is the New Black* defies traditional categorization, a fact that Debra Birnbaum says fits showrunner Jenji Kohan’s “rule-breaking personality” nicely.\(^{49}\) It is fitting that such a show would tackle character types that are less represented on mainstream television, including characters with a bisexual orientation. Where *Revenge* often relies on narrative shortcuts in the form of stereotypical portrayals of Nolan’s character, Piper (Taylor Schilling) on *Orange is the New Black* manages to consistently avoid many of those preconceptions. *Orange is the New Black*, however, paints a picture of bisexuality that is problematic beyond the stereotypes that plague a show such as *Revenge*.

Rather than stereotype bisexuality, *Orange is the New Black* consistently fails to directly acknowledge the existence of bisexuality as a legitimate orientation. Piper, like Nolan, is visible and identifiable as bisexual, but actual acknowledgement of her bisexuality is noticeably absent. Furthermore, the portrayal becomes more challenging than simple omission, as Piper faces negative consequences each time she demonstrates a more fluid sexuality. Piper’s non-stereotypical visibility results in penalties for acting on her sexuality, subtly vilifying her bisexual tendencies and ultimately reinforcing ideas of sexuality as a

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binary distinction. This trend is consistent throughout the entire extant story line beginning with the construction of Piper Chapman’s character background prior to the time she spends in prison and continuing on through the end of season three.

**Series and Character Background**

*Orange is the New Black* is loosely based upon the book of the same name, a memoir by Piper Kerman. The basic premise behind the series and the book is the same: Piper (Kerman in real life, Chapman on the show) is an affluent white woman who graduates from college feeling tired of her privileged but boring life, gets involved in a romantic relationship with a drug smuggler, and makes the mistake of helping her transport a suitcase of drug money across international borders. Almost ten years later, after Piper has happily settled back into her privileged existence and left her adventurous days behind, the drug cartel is taken down, and Piper is ultimately sentenced to fifteen months in federal prison for her role in the organization. Both the memoir and the show (in highly dramatized fashion) detail Piper’s experience as she self-surrenders and serves out her sentence, most of which takes place at a minimum-security correctional facility.

The televised version of *Orange is the New Black* takes place predominately at Litchfield Penitentiary in upstate New York. Litchfield is a fictional creation (Kerman actually served her time at Danbury Federal Correctional in Connecticut), much as the character of Piper Chapman is a highly fictionalized and dramatic

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50 Piper Kerman, *Orange Is the New Black* (Spiegel & Grau, 2010).
version of Piper Kerman. A large part of what makes Piper Chapman such an interesting case study, however, is the artistic liberties taken by the show’s writers in constructing her character. Additionally, while the memoir focuses directly on Kerman’s personal experience, the show format allows for the in-depth development of the entire cast of characters. Piper serves as a focal point early on in the series, allowing for our introduction to the environment at Litchfield; Kohan has referred to her character as the “gateway drug” that allows her to tell the stories of the much more diverse cast of characters on the show.51 Over the course of the series, Piper becomes more integrated into the group as part of the ensemble.

While most of this analysis will focus on the television series, there is one particularly relevant difference between Piper Kerman and Piper Chapman that is worth noting. Piper Chapman self-identifies as bisexual, whereas Piper Kerman self-identified as a lesbian for most of her life.52 Kerman was actually engaged to a man when she went to prison (she is now married to him and currently identifies herself as bisexual when asked in interviews53), but she presents her fiancé unmistakably in her memoir as an anomaly in her life. This is significant to this chapter because it suggests Kerman’s relationship with the woman who involved her in criminal activity (referred to under the pseudonym Nora in Kerman’s memoir) cannot possibly be connected to her sexuality, regardless of the course of events that landed Kerman in prison. Nora was one of several women whom Piper Kerman was

52 Kerman, Orange Is the New Black.
romantically involved with over the course of her young adulthood. Nora fascinated Kerman because of her lavish, adventurous lifestyle, and they began spending time together because Kerman was drawn to the excitement that came with Nora’s job. Kerman’s relationship with Nora was out of the ordinary because Nora was a criminal—not because Nora was a woman.

_Erased Bisexuality_

Piper Chapman is labeled in many ways. She is called Blondie, Blanca, Fancy, and Dandelion, among other things; and those are just within the first three episodes. Piper’s fellow inmates label her based on everything from her appearance to her intelligence but remarkably never because of her bisexuality. The labels ascribed to Piper by the other inmates have a metonymic function, standing in as markers for almost all aspects of her personality with the sole exception of her bisexuality. In an environment where everyone labels everything, a lack of labeling based on Piper’s sexuality is conspicuous in its absence. The actual bisexual label is used only once in the first three seasons, and even then the conversation takes place between Piper’s fiancé Larry and his father, not within the prison environment where the bisexual character is actually present. While at first glance it may seem as though this is a positive move—there are still visible bisexual characters, and no one at Litchfield is actively ridiculing the concept of bisexuality, after all—it is one that results in what both academic scholarship and popular culture have come to call

bi-erasure. This reluctance to name and claim bisexuality as a legitimate and permanent sexual orientation is one that has been written about profusely in recent years and contributes to societal attitudes of biphobia—the irrational fear of or aversion to bisexuality.\textsuperscript{56} In many cases, bi-erasure and related biphobia can have severe negative consequences for individuals who identify as bisexual. The consequences of biphobia manifest in many ways, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and sexual violence among the bisexual population than among either of its monosexual counterparts.\textsuperscript{57} It is a concept that is particularly troubling.

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when it manifests in shows that are largely regarded as progressive and hailed as
good examples of diversity, such as *Orange is the New Black*. Much as Nolan’s
attractive packaging in *Revenge* distracts audiences from the negative stereotypes,
the accepting environment of *Orange is the New Black* directs attention away from
the show’s obvious bi-erasure, which often leaves us looking to context clues for
confirmation of Piper’s true sexual orientation.

Fortunately, where the confirmation of bisexuality is markedly absent, the
context clues are abundant. Beyond the fact that Piper has romantic encounters with
both her fiancé Larry and at least two different female characters, there are other
suggestions as well. Within the first minute of the show, as part of a voice-over
monologue where Piper is discussing how she once loved “getting clean” before
prison ruined that experience for her, we see Piper in back to back scenes showering
with Alex (the fictitious version of Nora, the former girlfriend who landed Piper in
prison) and taking a bath with Larry. The implication is clear, when Piper thinks of
things that she loves doing and the people she loves doing those things with, both
Alex and Larry make the list.

Despite the reluctance to actually label Piper as bisexual, there are other
scenes and dialogue scattered throughout the show that invoke such a label. For
example, in season one episode “The Chickening,” Piper defends her sexuality by
saying “You don’t just turn gay. You fall somewhere on a spectrum. Like, on like a

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58 Walkley, “Bi-Erasure in Orange Is the New Black”; Leninsky, “Orange Is the New Black”;
Cruz, “The Year in Bisexual Invisibility.”
59 “I Wasn’t Ready.”
Later in the same season, in “Bora Bora Bora,” Piper explicitly references her attraction to men and women (though the conversation is arguably more indicative of her ego than her orientation) when she states, “I like hot girls. I like hot boys. What can I say? I’m shallow!” In the three seasons of the show, these comments are as close as anyone gets to actually identifying Piper as bisexual. Far more common is the trend to ignore the option of bisexuality entirely and attempt to classify her as one of the binary extremes.

*Orange is the New Black* presents nearly wholesale acceptance of the sexual orientation of most of the characters, provided they are clearly labeled as either homosexual or heterosexual. Lesbian women and straight women co-exist at Litchfield quite contentedly most of the time, at least in regard to who is sleeping with whom. In fact, even the idea of “gay for the stay” (as Counselor Healy calls it in Piper’s first meeting with him), where self-identified straight women experiment with other women simply because they are serving long sentences and have no other option, is something that is widely acknowledged and accepted as part of the prison dynamic. When there is negative attention directed toward same-sex activity in the prison, it is the intolerance that is portrayed as unacceptable; the antagonistic characters exclusively vocalize hatred of same-sex romantic involvement. The vast majority of the pushback against same-sex attraction at Litchfield is perpetrated by either Correctional Officer Sam Healy, who is Piper’s assigned counselor and is consistently coded in the narrative as a manipulative, sexist jerk, or by Tiffany Doggett (often called Pennsatucky by the other women), an inmate whose religious

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fanaticism in the first two seasons is so extreme that she is alternately depicted as crazy, evil, or both.

Forcing Piper into a category seems a bit unusual, especially in an environment where both gay and straight characters are generally regarded as unexceptional. Yet that is exactly what happens in Piper’s case. Alex calls her a “straight girl” on more than one occasion and to more than one person. In the first season alone, she complains about Piper to both Nicky (a fellow inmate at Litchfield) and Piper herself, each time lamenting the woes of being a lesbian in love with a straight girl. Her complaints elicit drastically different responses in each of these particular cases (empathy from Nicky, who is a fellow lesbian, and anger from Piper), but Alex’s implication is the same in either case: Piper is straight and experimenting with women and is bound to cause Alex nothing but trouble and heartache. Counselor Healy, likewise, at first warns Piper not to feel pressured to participate in lesbian activity and then later tries to convince her that Alex is sick but clarifies that he knows that Piper is really not like that. Healy’s blatant assumption that Piper is straight and incapable of sexual agency is condescending at best and implies not only the binary distinction of straight/lesbian but also preferences straightness as the only normal and unforced option. Alex complains about Piper’s straightness, Healy is convinced that the pretty and intelligent blonde girl cannot possibly be one of them, and all of Litchfield knows that Piper has a male fiancé. In spite of all that, Piper gets referred to as a lesbian as well,

63 “I Wasn’t Ready”; “F*cksgiving.”
particularly after she begins to get close to Alex again. The allusions to Piper’s ascribed homosexuality happen often, though some are much more explicit than others. For example, in one particularly significant scene that results in Piper being sent to the Secure Housing Unit (solitary confinement known as the SHU), Pennsatucky tells Counselor Healy that Piper is a lesbian and accuses Alex and Piper of “lesbianing together.”

The confusion over which box best suits Piper is not confined only to those she encounters at Litchfield. In both the present and pre-incarceration flashback scenes, there is similar confusion regarding Piper’s sexuality. The consensus among Piper’s friends and family is that she was straight, but Alex turned her gay and got her in trouble, and then she saw the error of her ways and got straight again. The idea that Piper’s inclination to be involved with women is anything more than fleeting appears to baffle most of them. Piper’s parents, in particular, seem to be most resistant to Piper’s fluid sexual orientation. In the season two episode “Low Self Esteem City,” Piper’s mother visits her at Litchfield, and upon hearing again that Piper has ended her engagement with Larry, reassures Piper that she will find herself another man and then offers to help her do so. Regardless of Piper’s current situation (she is literally unavailable to meet anyone outside of prison for the next year), her mother’s assumption that Piper will ultimately end up with a man is telling. It is clearly inconceivable to her that Piper might be interested in dating a woman instead of a man after breaking up with Larry, and she cannot seem to envision a world in which her daughter does not bend to her expectations.

64 “F*cksgiving.”
Other characters aside from Piper’s mother express quite a bit of confusion about her sexuality as well. Piper and her best friend Polly have several conversations in which Polly not only calls Piper a lesbian but also informs her once (only partially in jest) that the amount of satisfaction she is getting from her relationship with Alex is “just excessive.” Larry, though, struggles with Piper’s sexuality the most, seemingly unable to understand how Piper could possibly have romantic feelings for both him and Alex simultaneously. Aside from his single comment that she might be bi, Larry’s worldview seems upended by his attempts to figure out what to call her and what that means for their relationship. Larry expresses his frustration explicitly in at least two different conversations, separated not only by the people in whom he confides but also by a significant amount of time. Larry insists to his father in the episode “Looks Blue, Tastes Red” that Piper “was not a lesbian anymore, not with me…then she’s in prison, what, a few weeks? Bam! A lesbian again. It was good with us. I know it was. I think…what if that was a lie, too?” He clearly sees an either/or scenario here—either Piper is a lesbian or she is straight, with no acknowledgement that she might actually fall somewhere in the middle. His comments imply that her sexuality is a switch that can be flipped back and forth on a whim, and that his sexual prowess (or lack thereof) is responsible for flipping the switch. Failing to admit the possibility of bisexuality as a legitimate option makes his bewilderment far worse. If Larry were able to consider Alex as just another rival, regardless of her gender, it seems as though he could easily settle into a state of anger at Piper’s betrayal. The refusal to acknowledge bisexuality as

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67 “Looks Blue, Tastes Red.”
an option leads to Larry blaming Piper’s infidelity on his inadequacies, rather than on her disloyalty.

In “Fool Me Once,” the issue comes up again, this time in a conversation with Piper’s brother Cal. Larry outright asks him, “What is she, gay now?” to which Cal responds, “I don’t know about now. I think that she is what she is, man. I’m going to go ahead and guess that one of the issues here is your need to say that a person is exactly anything.” Cal’s response, though much more cognizant of Piper’s innate sexuality than we have seen elsewhere, is hardly helpful to the cause for bisexual visibility. This, more so than any of the other implied bi-erasure evident in the show, is a clear-cut example of what Maria San Filippo describes as “missed moments.” The sentiment is there with Cal encouraging Larry to just let Piper be who she is and not fault her for it. The writers of Orange is the New Black were handed a golden opportunity for Cal to stand up for his sister and defend her bisexuality simply by calling it what it truly is—and he just misses the mark. It is no surprise that Cal is the most understanding of Piper’s sexuality, since he lives a remarkably non-conformist life himself. The choice to leave the defense of Piper’s bisexuality solely in the hands of her eccentric, stoner brother, however, is decidedly a disappointment.

Even Piper occasionally makes comments that demonstrate an inability to fully acknowledge her bisexual nature. For example, when she is forced to tell Larry about her indictment on money laundering charges, he confronts her about her past.

Larry questions why he never knew about any of her history when Piper knows everything about him. When put on the spot, Piper calls the entire time in her life a phase—her “lost soul, post-college adventure phase”—in a misguided attempt to avoid upsetting Larry. Piper bows far too easily to the pressure to explain away her attractions to women, but the context of the conversation is far more telling than simple appeasement. The remark is buried in a discussion about her criminal activity, and the sum total of what we know about Piper at this point in the story links her bisexual experience inextricably to the time in her life when she was involved in a drug smuggling enterprise. So what really was the phase? The law breaking or the girlfriend? The remainder of my analysis indicates that the answer to that question is that actually neither was a phase. For Piper the two things are intimately linked, and this idea as a whole is far more damaging to societal images of bisexuality than the lack of a label could ever be.

**Vilified Bisexuality**

At the same time as Piper’s story fails to acknowledge and label her sexual orientation as bisexuality, the narrative manages to punish Piper’s same-sex attractions each and every time they happen. She has been put in the straight box, and every single time she steps out of bounds something bad happens to her. The relationship that resulted in her imprisonment is merely the tip of the iceberg. The negative consequences that Piper experiences as a result of her bisexuality actually

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70 “I Wasn’t Ready.”
start much earlier in her life than the criminal activity and continue on past her conviction and well into her prison term at Litchfield. It makes the most sense, however, to address the events and their consequences in the order that they happened to Piper chronologically beginning with the first time Piper meets Alex.

The first meeting, documented during a flashback in the episode “Lesbian Request Denied,” takes place in a bar where Alex is a customer and Piper is applying for a job. The differences between the two women in this scene are striking. Alex is the almost stereotypically dark and edgy—jet-black hair with electric blue highlights, hipster clothing, and enough nerve to mercilessly make fun of a perfect stranger. Piper, on the other hand, is the picture of naiveté with her long, blonde ringlets, hippie-inspired style, and wide-eyed surprise at Alex’s boldness. It is the scene that sets up everything that follows, including Alex disclosing to Piper in their first conversation that she works for an international drug cartel and Piper’s assumption that she must be joking. From this point on, Piper begins to express romantic interest in Alex.

While we do not see the next part of their story until well into the following season, chronologically the next event in Alex and Piper’s relationship that is documented on camera is their first physical encounter. The two are in bed together when Alex takes a phone call. While she is absent from the room, a woman enters the bedroom and attacks Piper, jumping on top of her and punching her in the face. We learn that the woman is Sylvie, the girlfriend that Alex neglected to mention.

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71 “Lesbian Request Denied.”
72 “Little Mustachioed Shit.”
before jumping into bed with Piper. The event marks the beginning of a revealing trend. Alex is the one who acts dishonestly, both in cheating on her girlfriend and not telling Piper that she is unavailable, but it is Piper who is punished for her transgressions. Piper shows interest in stepping outside the bounds of her clearly defined heterosexuality, and there are serious negative consequences for her every time.

Because she has genuine feelings for Alex, Piper forgives her for the dishonesty about the girlfriend, and the two of them reconcile, with Alex swearing that things are over between her and Sylvie. Piper makes the decision to confess to her best friend Polly about her newfound interest in women (or at least this one particular woman). The words are barely out of her mouth when the doorbell rings and Piper opens the door to find a flaming paper bag on the doorstep, which she steps on and quickly discovers is filled with feces.73 The immediacy of the retribution is almost comical. The intended assumption is that Sylvie is responsible for this vengeance as well, but far more important than the perpetrator here is the pattern we already see beginning to form. Again Piper has put herself on the line as she explores her sexuality, and again the consequences are swift and unpleasant.

As Piper and Alex get more involved with each other, the consequences for Piper get increasingly severe. Piper continues to pursue her relationship with Alex, undeterred by Alex’s lies, Sylvie’s retribution, or Polly’s uncertainty about Alex’s morality. There are many specifics left out of the story, as we are only shown bits and pieces of their relationship in flashback form, but the sum total of what we do

73 Ibid.
see is designed to lead us to one conclusion: Piper falls so hard for Alex that she is willing to do anything for her, including the illegal activity lands her in prison. Piper’s subsequent conviction and imprisonment are ultimately framed as the price she pays for loving a woman and for having the nerve to love her so fiercely. Unfortunately, by the time Piper realizes that she is losing herself for the sake of her relationship, it is far too late.

Ten years later, when Piper arrives at Litchfield, we meet a woman who has done such a good job convincing the world of her heterosexuality that her fiancé has no idea she was ever with a woman. Piper has stayed in her heterosexual box like a good little girl and settled down to a nice, boring life with Larry. She is determined to do her time and get back to her life. That is, until Alex shows up at Litchfield and the whole cycle begins again. The pattern of negative consequences resumes almost immediately when Piper gets thrown into the SHU for simply dancing with Alex at the prison’s Thanksgiving celebration. It is significant to note here that while both Alex and Piper are involved, and other inmates behave similarly at the same time as Alex and Piper are dancing together, Piper is the only one who is punished for her actions. None of the women who are actually lesbians (Alex, Big Boo, Crazy Eyes, and Poussey) or the women who are straight (Cindy, Janae, and Taystee) experiences any sort of consequence beyond being asked to settle down. Only the bisexual woman is singled out for punishment, and the punishment is far too severe for the offense. Again, the implication is clear. Piper has stepped out of her box, and that is unacceptable.

74 “F*cksgiving.”
Examples of the vilification of bisexuality do not stop there. Piper’s feelings for Alex and Larry at this point are so convoluted that Piper is not even sure what she wants most of the time, yet she still continues to see her life fall apart while she tries to figure it out. Her relationship with Larry disintegrates, Larry begins an affair with Piper’s best friend, and Piper is dragged to Chicago to testify against the leader of the drug ring (an act which gets Alex released early while Piper continues to languish in prison). Piper continues to persevere despite the negative consequences, continuing to pick herself up and move on in an attempt to figure out what will truly make her happy. The longer she stays undecided, however, and the more Piper leans toward picking Alex, the worse things seem to get.

While it is possible to suggest that Piper’s affection for the untrustworthy Alex is the cause of all her misfortunes, the pattern of punishment continues when Piper demonstrates interest in other women. Toward the end of season three, when the pressure of being in prison together and alternately crazy mad and madly in love finally begins to get in the way of Piper and Alex’s relationship, Piper finds herself a new love interest. Enter Stella, the attractive Australian prisoner who quickly catches Piper’s eye as they work together in the prison’s sewing workshop. Piper once again dares to flirt with another woman, and the consequences begin, starting with difficulties in her relationship with Alex.

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So far, the connection between Piper’s sexually fluid orientation and her darker side has been subtle, but it is building to the point where it is not only noticeable but also extremely unsettling. By the end of the third season, it is clear that we are no longer dealing with the same Piper who met Alex in a bar years ago. There is a sharp distinction between the respectable, law-abiding, straight Piper that exists outside of prison and the darker, seedier, gayer Piper that she becomes after a few months behind bars. Indulging the other half of her sexuality is what started Piper down the road that landed her in prison in the first place, and since she has arrived at Litchfield, things have only gotten worse. Prison, and its undeniable and inextricable association with Piper’s sexuality, has resulted in a version of Piper that is nearly unrecognizable when compared to the woman we see in flashbacks, and this new Piper is willing to do simply awful things. She cheats on her fiancé, beats another inmate nearly to death, arranges and directs an illegal money-making scheme that involves selling dirty prison panties to perverts on the internet, and exacts disproportionate revenge on Stella for interfering with her crooked schemes.77 What appears at first to be an unfortunate association of Piper’s sexuality with the negative consequences in her life evolves over the course of the series into something much more sinister. In the end, the unrelenting consequences of her fluid sexuality are enough to warp Piper’s sense of morality into something that is barely recognizable and consequently far more damaging to the narrative of bisexuality presented on the show.

Conclusion

*Orange is the New Black*, as a whole, is a series that contains a lot of progressive elements. It unabashedly addresses issues of race, gender, and even sexuality to some degree, all in a manner that encourages us to laugh, to cry, and most importantly to identify with people who are different than we are. Where the show remains problematic, however, is in its depiction of bisexuality. *Orange is the New Black* moves beyond the mere token visibility afforded by Nolan on *Revenge* and provides a much more visible and nuanced bisexual character in Piper, which is inarguably a step in the right direction regarding representations of bisexuality. *Orange is the New Black* attempts to normalize bisexuality by rendering it visible but unlabeled, but that attempt is ultimately unsuccessful. Instead, *Orange is the New Black* actually achieves erasure and condemnation of bisexuality in failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of Piper’s sexual orientation and allowing for the unfortunate association of bisexuality with punitive consequence and distortion of morality. It is a move from visibility without depth to complexity without acknowledgement and approval, which still falls short of the ultimate goal of a narrative that encourages acceptance of bisexuality.
Chapter 4 – *Transparent*

“It's inspiring. I am so glad you get to be who you are.
That's who we should all be.”

~Sarah Pfefferman

*Introduction*

There is evidence that narratives of bisexuality have already begun to evolve. In the case of Nolan and *Revenge*, the show demonstrates a tendency to default to negative stereotypes, resulting in a narrative that accomplishes only simple visibility of bisexuality. With Piper and *Orange is the New Black*, the character is more nuanced and still a visible example of bisexuality, but her sexuality is both ignored and vilified through the narrative. Both portrayals are necessary milestones in the evolution of bisexual narratives on television but still problematic. Even when the characters are compelling, as both Nolan and Piper undoubtedly are, viewers are left with subtext that influences the overall narrative toward unfavorable treatment of bisexuality. Amazon original series *Transparent* exemplifies a step further in the narrative evolution, countering previous problematic narratives with narratives of bisexuality that are complex, realistic, and convincing.

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78 “Rollin’,” *Transparent* (Amazon, September 26, 2014).
*Transparent* has been met with widespread critical acclaim and commercial success. Its first season garnered Golden Globe wins for Best Television Series—Musical or Comedy and Best Actor in a Television Series—Musical or Comedy for Jeffery Tambor, as well as 11 Primetime Emmy Nominations, including wins for Outstanding Director for Jill Soloway and Outstanding Lead Actor. The show’s achievements illustrate the ability of its story to speak to viewers. Not only is it highly successful in spite of the relatively limited viewership that comes with airing exclusively on a subscription service, but it also survived Amazon’s unique and highly competitive pilot process to get produced in the first place.

Amazon’s method of content development differs from other networks in that it allows open submissions from the public for show ideas each year. The network then develops several shows to the pilot stage before allowing audiences to view, provide feedback, and vote during their “pilot season” on what shows will move on to full scale production. By the time *Transparent* was picked up for a full season, it was clear that it had found a way to connect with its audience, and that popularity has persisted since its premiere. *Transparent* often tackles highly sensitive topics, including sexuality and gender identity, and does so in a way that not only provides visibility for LGBT characters but also normalizes and promotes acceptance of identities that fall outside the standard, socially-accepted binaries. This is particularly important in the portrayal of bisexuality, as *Transparent* delivers a far more realistic and accepting picture of bisexuality than anything appearing on television thus far.

Series and Character Background

Transparent’s trial pilot episode debuted on Amazon Prime on February 6, 2014. After being picked up by the network, the first episode officially became available for streaming on August 27, 2014, with the remainder of the first season following on September 26, 2014, making it the most recent (and consequently the shortest running) of the television series examined in this study. The show offers a look into the lives of the Pfefferman family (divorced parents Mort and Shelley and their three adult children: Sarah, Josh, and Ali) as they struggle to navigate the transition of family patriarch Mort becoming Maura. Maura (Jeffrey Tambor) is a retired college professor who has spent her entire life living as a man. Now in her seventies, she has come to the realization that it is finally time to embrace her true identity, with the series beginning just as Maura shares her true self with her family and the world. Based loosely on show creator Jill Soloway’s experience of learning as an adult that her own father was transgender, Transparent presents a cast of characters that are realistic and that struggle with many true-to-life situations, including both sexuality and gender identity.

In addition to Maura, the remainder of the Pfefferman clan includes Shelly (Judith Light)—meddlesome and overbearing but well-meaning mother, Sarah (Amy Landecker)—oldest sister and married mother of two, Josh (Jay Duplass)—middle brother and party boy music producer, and Ali (Gaby Hoffman)—free spirited youngest sister who seems to have no idea what she wants to do with her life.

Maura’s transition initially acts as the catalyst for the show’s narrative, but

*Transparent* truly features an ensemble cast with each character’s storyline featured in nearly equal measure. Even the title seems to amount to more than a sum of its parts. Maura is literally a trans parent, but the show deals so much with the value of inner truth and honesty that more common connotations of transparent cannot be overlooked. It is in the spirit of such transparency that the show introduces its two most prominent bisexual characters: Sarah and Ali Pfefferman. The sisters provide two distinct examples of how difficult it can be to figure out where you belong, especially when finding that place requires honesty with oneself. The world of *Transparent* provides Sarah and Ali with an atmosphere that allows for freedom of exploration without fear of retribution. This is accomplished through narratives that depict any sexual orientation, including bisexuality, as normal and intrinsic to one’s being, and also as something that can and should be accepted by society at large.

*Normalized Bisexuality*

Sarah and Ali Pfefferman might be sisters, but they have drastically different personalities and life circumstances. At the start of the series, the first appearance of each underscores this point. Sarah is the picture of affluent domesticity—she is first seen in her conventional suburban kitchen, confidently getting her two young children ready for their school day, issuing orders to the Hispanic maid, and rolling her eyes because her high-powered, executive husband has left the house for work without saying goodbye. In contrast, Ali’s first scene is markedly different. She is
also shown first thing in the morning, alone, bedraggled, and struggling to get herself out of bed and to the coffee pot for her morning caffeine fix. Even the lighting changes between the two scenes: Sarah exists in the sunlit positivity of orderly suburban affluence while Ali stumbles around in her small, dark, shabby apartment trying her best not to trip over herself.81 The initial appearance of a character on television is always telling, as the first impression often sets up audience perception of the character, sometimes for the remainder of the series. With such short introductory scenes (Ali gets a mere 23 seconds of footage, and Sarah only 33), we have time to notice only one thing: contrast.

The Sarah and Ali character arcs reinforce that contrast throughout the show’s first two seasons. Sarah is initially married with a family, a stay-at-home mother who is so settled into that role that she is bored and restless. Her response to her boredom is to jump at the chance for new sensations wherever she can find them—rekindling an old romance, getting a prescription for medical marijuana, and experimenting with the world of S&M, among others—and damn the consequences. It is a storyline that takes her away from the comfortable, suburban life that she has always taken for granted and leaves her divorced, unhappy, and unsure of what to do with her life. Ali, on the other hand, starts out floundering. She is chronically unemployed and living off of money from her father, seemingly adrift with no idea of what to do with her life. Like Sarah, Ali also spends a great deal of time trying new things, but in her case, the exploration is not a sensation-seeking endeavor, but rather an obvious attempt to find what Sarah had and rejected: a place where she can

81 “Pilot,” Transparent (Amazon, August 27, 2014).
settle down and belong. Where Sarah’s reckless need to try new things results in the destruction of everything that she knows, Ali’s experiences push her in the other direction with each new discovery bringing her one step closer to finding out where she fits.

The only thing that Sarah and Ali seem to have in common besides sharing a family is a fluid sexual orientation, which is revealed in drastically different ways for each character. In Sarah’s case, there are indications that she might not be heterosexual from the beginning. In the pilot episode, Sarah runs into an old friend after dropping her children off at school. As they catch up, it is obvious from the conversation that Tammy (Melora Hardin) identifies as a lesbian; she speaks of both an ex-wife named Quinn and a current wife named Barb. What also emerges though, as Sarah feels the need to clarify her statement that she got married with the phrase “to a guy... his name’s Len... he’s great,” is that Tammy knows Sarah as someone who does not always date men.82 A later conversation between Ali and Sarah reveals the truth of that observation: Tammy is actually an ex-girlfriend from Sarah’s college days, one who was serious enough that they discussed adopting a child together.

Ali, on the other hand, does not show signs of bisexuality until much later in the series. She is certainly adventurous when it comes to sex, but exclusively with men up to this point in her life. Though Ali declares herself to be “politically... basically a lesbian,” she is also quick with a clarification. She is initially defensive, saying that while she would “totally love to be a lesbian,” she is “like really into

82 Ibid.
dudes...the dude-lier the better.”

Despite the clear attempt to assert her heterosexuality—after all, she has just been asked if she is a lesbian by a guy who has piqued her interest—Ali’s vehement justification of her interest in (manly) men implies that she is more insecure about her sexuality than she is willing to admit. Ali only begins to openly question where she falls on the spectrum of sexuality after a difficult conversation with her best friend Syd (Carrie Brownstein). Syd reluctantly confesses that she has romantic feelings toward Ali (and has since they were in the eighth grade), which initiates a dramatic shift in Ali’s worldview.

Suddenly, as Ali is forced to reevaluate her friendship with Syd in light of this new information, she also begins to question many other things she has always known to be true, including her own sexual orientation. By the third episode of season two, Ali begins to explore her sexuality in earnest, both with Syd and another woman named Leslie (Cherry Jones), who is the head of the women’s studies department at UCLA.

Both Sarah and Ali are bisexual in the most literal sense of the word; they have both been romantically involved with men and women. The way that bisexuality plays out in each woman’s life looks different because they are different people with different needs and desires to account for as they search for love and happiness. Just as having many examples of lived heterosexuality on television enables us to understand without having to be told that every heterosexual person is different, Transparent provides us with Sarah and Ali Pfefferman as examples of

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85 “New World Coming,” Transparent (Amazon, December 10, 2015).
how bisexuality varies from person to person. Unlike shows such as *Revenge* and *Orange is the New Black*, which contain only a single token bisexual character, the presence of two complex bisexual characters encourages comparison and contrast and inhibits the ability to stereotype, which often occurs when a single bisexual character exists in narrative world full of monosexual people.

One of the biggest strengths of the character portrayals on *Transparent* is the show’s ability to clearly define boundaries between the choices and characteristics of each character. Both Sarah and Ali often act selfishly, and they regularly struggle with honesty and vulnerability, which results in some bad decisions for both. Sarah cheats on her husband and ruins her marriage. Ali refuses to grow up and support herself. Yet the show always manages to portray them in such a way as to remind viewers that sisters *are* bisexual, but they *choose* to do unfortunate things. The distinction is subtle but significant, resulting in a representation of sexuality as something that is not a choice. Sarah’s marriage falls apart because she chooses to cheat, not because the person she cheats with is a woman. Her bisexuality is merely a fact, whereas it is the choice of her infidelity that results in the consequence of divorce. Bisexuality is still an important element of who Sarah and Ali are as people, but it is not coded as responsible for the choices they make.

One of the clearest examples of this is in the way the other characters react to Sarah’s divorce from Len. There is surprise, not at the breakup of Sarah and Len’s already rocky marriage but because Sarah is having an affair. This is especially obvious when Maura walks in on a still-married Sarah passionately kissing Tammy
one afternoon when Maura arrives home from her support group. Ali expresses some concern for Len, though she is the only character to address his feelings directly, simply by asking “But what about Len?” and receiving a shrug from Sarah in response. Remarkably, no one ever so much as comments that Tammy is another woman or accuses Sarah of being a closeted lesbian all along. The concern of Sarah’s family is focused where it should be: on the fact that the end of her marriage is sad and that they love Sarah even though she is at fault for her infidelity.

This stands in stark contrast to the way Piper’s family approaches both her sexuality and her infidelity on Orange is the New Black. The details are different, but the basic storylines are remarkably similar: a woman in a serious relationship with a man falls back into a romantic relationship with a former female lover. Where Sarah meets disappointment from her family for her infidelity, Sarah’s family accepts her identity and her new significant other. Conversely, Piper encounters derision and denial, not based on the ethical failures associated with infidelity, but on her bisexuality as the root cause for such infidelity. Piper’s family and Larry categorize her attraction to Alex as temporary and assume that being with a woman (any woman, but Alex especially) is the cause of all her troubles. Piper’s sexuality, even in its transient state, is to blame for her choices. Sarah’s sexuality is barely a footnote in comparison, with Sarah herself bearing the blame for her choices and working through the consequences of her actions to get her life back on track. Sarah is a bisexual character who is sanctioned because of her unwise choices, whereas Piper is a character whose bisexuality is blamed for her unwise choices.

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86 “Pilot.”
87 “Moppa,” Transparent (Amazon, September 26, 2014).
If it were not clear enough already that no one is bothered by Sarah’s sexuality, the point is solidified near the end of the second season when Sarah unexpectedly encounters another mother (Jocelyn) from her children’s school while at the Idyllwild Wimmin's Festival, a music festival populated almost exclusively by women who love other women. The conversation goes:

Jocelyn: Sarah? Oh my god!

Sarah: Jocelyn? Hi! What the fuck are you doing here? I didn’t know you were...

Jocelyn: A lesbian? I am.

Sarah: Really?

Jocelyn: Well, you know Marla McFarland, right? With the twins in the third grade?

Sarah: Yeah?

Jocelyn: Yeah, we left our husbands for each other.

Sarah: Seriously? I’m, like, not the only outcast? That’s so cool.

(Awkward pause while Jocelyn looks confused)

Jocelyn: Can I just, like, say something to you and just try to help you out a little bit, maybe?

Sarah: Uh, okay?
Jocelyn: Nobody cares about what you do. I mean, I know you think they care, but they don’t. You know, people walking around at our school, they’re mostly thinking about car pools, and play dates, and homework, and... you know it’s that. That face.

Sarah: What?

Jocelyn: That hurt feelings poopy face that you’re walking around with. Nobody wants to see that. Really, like, lose it. Forgive yourself. Like, it’s ok. Move on, man!\(^{88}\)

More so than any other bit of dialogue, this conversation illustrates the show’s stance on sexual orientation and its relation to Sarah’s character. Sarah is not painted as an outcast either because of her attraction to women or because she screwed up her marriage. She just is who she is, she likes who she likes, and if she has made some mistakes along the way, it’s okay because everyone does. The notion of forgiveness is particularly important. Sarah blames herself for her actions, and maybe that blame is somewhat justified. She does need to let go of her mistakes in order to move on. What requires no forgiveness, however, is her sexuality. Forgiveness is something that is given to a person, for an action. If bisexuality is inherently part of a person, then it is simply an action or a choice that can be forgiven. No one else cares who Sarah is attracted to, and she needs to accept that

\(^{88}\) “Man on the Land,” Transparent (Amazon, December 10, 2015).
her sexuality is inherently a part of her. Bisexuality is not a problem to be forgiven but an identity to be embraced.

Like *Orange is the New Black*, no one uses the word bisexual in *Transparent*. The ramifications of bi-erasure are significantly different, however. *Transparent* provides multiple examples of bisexual characters in Sarah and Ali (as well as Syd to a lesser degree), but no one uses the actual label. Still, the atmosphere surrounding issues of sexuality is different than what is depicted on *Orange is the New Black*. Instead of privileging monosexuality as a preferable state of being, sexuality of all types is normalized. The elimination of the term in this context is less a symptom of erasure of bisexuality than a sign of an erasure of arbitrary boundaries. As Maria San Filippo notes,

In recognizing how desire is often steered by circumstance and emotional need, *Transparent* demonstrates a willingness to parse the rules of attraction that makes it less urgent that it voices the B word explicitly. Moreover, in seeing sexual fluidity as the norm and thus defamiliarizing the cultural imperative toward what, in *The B Word*, I term *compulsory monosexuality*, *Transparent* may leave the B word silent without silencing bisexuality or isolating it at the margins.89 The refusal to affix a label to an individual for his or her sexual orientation is a choice of power, not erasure. Normalizing sexuality of any type empowers characters like Ali and Sarah to explore their sexuality and find acceptance.

wherever they happen to land. By encoding sexual fluidity as part of the show’s hegemonic discourse, Transparent situates bisexuality in a context where it moves from being marginalized and ignored to being respected as complex, variable, and legitimate, the same as monosexual orientations.

**Sympathetic Bisexuality**

The majority of the storylines on Transparent present sexual orientation and gender identity as intrinsic aspects of the characters and normalize the perception of sexuality and gender as fluid concepts. In spite of this unprecedented level of tolerance on television, the narrative is also not so naïve as to assume that the wider world is as understanding as the small, suburban bubble the Pfeffermans inhabit. What Transparent does very well, however, is acknowledge outside discrimination in a way that reminds audiences of its prevalence in the wider world while also clearly identifying the characters with whom audiences should sympathize.

One particular storyline explicitly connects the past and present to highlight the history of discrimination surrounding the construction of sexuality and gender identity as fluid concepts. This aspect of the story is told through flashback sequences, with only brief glimpses at first, and more solid blocks of footage as the season progresses. The flashback sequence is a common occurrence on Transparent—most of Maura’s pre-transition history is revealed that way and one entire episode is set entirely in 1994—but these scenes are different. They are set much further in the past (in Berlin in the 1930s) and do not directly feature any
member of the Pfefferman family with whom we are already familiar. These scenes are, however, intimately connected to Ali.

*Transparent* employs a clever casting trick that uses the actress who plays the young Ali (Emily Robinson) in other flashback sequences. Without any additional explanation at first, it seems as though Ali herself inhabits both timelines. Eventually, it is revealed that the young woman in 1930s Berlin is actually Rose, Ali’s grandmother and Maura’s mother, cementing the visual connection between the two women. In addition to the doubling of the actress, the unusual juxtaposition of past and present is staged visually to match what Ali is doing or seeing. For example, the first series of jumbled flashback images cuts into the modern day storyline as Ali dives into the family pool at a party. The instant she hits the water, the scene shifts to a series of convoluted and overlapping images from Rose’s story in 1930s Berlin, which continue until Ali resurfaces and rejoins reality.\(^9^0\) It is not out of character for Ali to see strange things, as she is prone to creative interpretations of the world around her based on her state of mind at the time. She has already experienced a new friend’s home as a rustic, western-themed cabin instead of the comfortable, modern suburban home it is in reality. We have also seen her sitting on a beach and so immersed in memories of her younger self in that same location that she is able to interact with both her younger self and other person in the memory.\(^9^1\) To say that Ali’s imagination is vivid would be an understatement. Her imagination often influences the way she experiences her world, but it also

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enables her to notice things and make connections that less inventive people might never see.

Over the course of season two, the scenes come into sharper focus. The flashback narrative follows Rose, a young Jewish girl living in 1933 Berlin and witnessing the rise of Nazi rule. Rose’s father has already moved to America, and her mother Yetta (Michaela Watkins) is desperate to move Rose and her brother out of Germany and reunite the family in the United States. Such a trip requires ticket money and visas. Rose’s brother apparently has the necessary connections to secure such necessities, but the brother no longer lives with Yetta and Rose. It turns out that the brother, referred to by their mother only as Gershon (or Ger), is at the Institute for Sexual Research—a real life place in 1930s Berlin that was run by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld and functioned as a safe haven for LGBT people of all types—and is living as a woman named Gittel (Hari Nef). Gittel’s appearance seems to be unsurprising to Rose. The implication is that Rose has known for some time that Gittel is transgender and accepts Gittel for who she is. Furthermore, Rose’s actions indicate that she is drawn to the atmosphere at the Institute herself. Eventually, Rose and Yetta are able to get their visas and travel to America, but without Gittel, who refuses to either travel as a man under the name Ger or leave Magnus. Gittel is eventually arrested by Nazi soldiers raiding the Institute. Rose leaves for America with her mother shortly thereafter, never to see Gittel again.92

92 “Flicky-Flicky, Thump-Thump”; “Cherry Blossoms,” Transparent (Amazon, December 10, 2015); “Oscillate,” Transparent (Amazon, December 10, 2015); “Man on the Land.”
The intersection of this scattered parallel storyline with present day reality happens most clearly at the Idyllwild Wimmin’s Festival with Ali shown holding Rose’s hand and watching in horror as past and present seem to collide before their eyes. The harmless festival bonfire merges with images of chaos and burning books at the Institute. They watch as Gittel is dragged away by Nazi soldiers while somewhere in the near vicinity, Maura has also reached her breaking point and is screaming out her frustration at encountering intolerance even in a theoretically accepting place like Idyllwild. The surrounding crowd is a mix of festival attendees, soldiers, and members of the Institute, all visually coexisting but connected only through Ali and Rose and the pain they share.\footnote{“Man on the Land.”} It is utter chaos that is incomprehensible as a realistic series of events, but the confusion serves as an excellent representation of societal inability to understand and accept fluidity, regardless of whether it manifests through sexuality or gender identity. The resulting discrimination and suffering is plainly visible through Ali and Rose’s shared experience. This poignant illustration of their anguish highlights the need for acceptance of people of all types, no matter where they fall on the spectrum.

Characters on television have only just begun to reflect the wide range of sexualities and gender identities that manifest in the world’s population. For people who do not regularly interact with members of the LGBT community, this can make nonconforming identities seem foreign and frightening, particularly because they are harder to categorize. One of the major strengths of \textit{Transparent}, particularly in this ongoing historical sequence, is that the show manages to convey that truth that
LGBT people have always existed and persevered in spite of the best efforts of society to subdue them. The setting of Pfefferman family history in a time of Nazi rule is an especially moving choice. They are already in danger because they are Jewish and living in Germany, but the threat of discovery and retribution is still not enough to keep Gittel from fighting for the right to be herself.

The historical narrative weaves through present day scenes, strategically echoing the past and conveying the feeling that precious little has changed over the last eighty years. The modern day Pfeffermans might be free from Nazi rule, but they are all too familiar with the struggles of their ancestors. Gittel and Maura are both transgender women who are desperately trying to be true to themselves. Ali and Rose are both unsure of where they fit and are forced to experience the pain of watching a loved one fight for the right to embrace her true self. Even the staging of the scenes is significant. They mirror Ali’s journey of self-discovery, initially convoluted and incomprehensible as she starts out questioning and insecure and gradually becoming longer and more cohesive until everything comes together that night at the Idyllwild Wimmin’s Festival. Ali finally sees everything collectively, past lining up with present, and she cannot help but notice the similarity. For the first time, Ali realizes that she is not alone in either her pain or her individuality, and there is comfort in the company. There is obvious continuity between generations, both in the suffering caused by the failure to fit societal expectations and the willingness to love one another in spite of their differences. Clothing aside, the Pfeffermans in 1933 Berlin look a lot like the Pfeffermans in 2016 Los Angeles. Whichever generation we consider, the message is clear: discrimination against
people we do not understand has gone on for far too long. Treating others poorly is unacceptable, and it is time for everyone to learn how to value one another and admire the diversity that makes life richer.

**Conclusion**

With *Transparent*, we are finally beginning to see what a narrative that is unconstrained by arbitrary categorical distinctions might look like in practice. Rather than defaulting to negative stereotypes or presenting characters that are different as something to be feared or ignored, the stories in the world of *Transparent* present audiences with characters of all shapes and sizes in an environment where variety is generally accepted as normal. Sarah and Ali Pfefferman struggle against societal expectations and inhabit bisexuality as something normal, innate, and as variable as any other element of individual identity. And their story is believable because underneath the bisexual label they are realistic, flawed people who screw up and keep moving forward while learning from their mistakes. The authenticity of the characters that is achieved through imperfection and hardship resonates with us in a way that no stereotype ever could.

In Amazon’s promotional trailer entitled “*Transparent: Meet the Pfeffermans,*” creator Jill Soloway distills the essence of the show to down to a single question: “Would you still love me if I’m _____?”

94 *Transparent* confirms that in the case of bisexuality (and any other nonconforming sexual orientation or gender identity), the

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answer to that question is a resounding yes. As a result, Transparent illustrates that it is indeed possible for television to depict bisexuality in a way that promotes understanding and acceptance.
Chapter 5 – The Search Continues...

“Giving people a way to understand their lives is the true gift of the storyteller. The better we understand our world, the easier it is to think beyond the confines of the present and change the future.”

~Annalee Newitz

The title of this project, “In Search of an AliBI,” reflects many of the challenges facing bisexuality on television and in popular culture today. The concept of the alibi, and the legal connotations it carries, brings with it not only the notion of vindication but also a defense for the innocence of the wrongly accused. Bisexuality as a concept is not at fault for its lack of acceptance. Societal perception is flawed, and consequently resistant to the idea that bisexuality is a legitimate and permanent sexuality. So how is it possible to find evidence that validates something like bisexuality? Any alibi requires witnesses to validate its accuracy, and I propose that witnesses, in this case, take the form of televised narratives about bisexuality and the people who identify that way.

Television narratives are prevalent in modern society and so have an immense amount of potential to influence what is deemed acceptable in our culture.

We have already seen it happen with narratives of homosexuality—as the narratives have become more accepting of homosexuality, so has society at large. The process, one that Walter Fisher calls narrative rationality, involves the utilization of stories as the evidence that informs decision-making processes and helps people understand the world around them. Fisher's narrative paradigm holds that in order for a narrative to contribute to narrative rationality, however, it must first possess narrative coherence and narrative fidelity.\(^6\) A story must both make sense within itself and resonate with the lived experience of the person exposed to it in order to effectively inform processes of narrative reasoning and influence decision-making. In the case of bisexuality, we have seen through three different case studies that televised narratives are evolving but still often fail to fully satisfy Fisher’s criteria.

Nolan on ABC’s *Revenge* provides an excellent illustration of what happens with early attempts to portray a character that has been deemed “different.” He contributes to the visibility of bisexuality in popular culture by the simple fact of his existence, particularly considering his placement as a main character in a primetime, mainstream broadcast network television show. Nolan’s character is attractive, intelligent, and compelling, all of which are arguably positive characteristics, but he still misses the mark for what constitutes a substantive portrayal of bisexuality. Nolan’s bisexuality is consistently associated with ideas of promiscuity, transience, indecision, and gender confusion. In short, his role often defaults to the narrative shortcut of the stereotype, resulting in an essentialist portrayal of bisexuality that is

inherently shallow and ultimately does more to reinforce difference than promote acceptance.

With Piper on Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*, images of bisexuality become more visible but still remain problematic. Piper is a far more complicated character than Nolan and largely avoids the negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality, but she encounters new challenges to accurate representation. Rather than suffering from the laziness of the stereotypical portrayal, Piper is well developed, but her bisexuality is either ignored entirely or she experiences punitive consequences for acting upon it. This results in a narrative of erasure and vilification; bisexuality is present and the character is much more complex and believable, but her sexuality is relegated to the margins and cast in a decidedly negative light.

Amazon Original Series *Transparent* exemplifies a final progression in the evolution of bisexual narratives with the stories of Sarah and Ali Pfefferman. They possess the visibility of Nolan and the complexity of Piper but also experience acceptance and validation in a way that neither of the other characters has. They are, above all else, human beings. Sarah and Ali are bisexual, and perform their sexuality in drastically different ways, but the focus of the narrative allows for the expression of bisexuality without dismissing or condemning it. *Transparent* encourages erasure in the most positive sense of the word, breaking down boundaries between groups of people and presenting a world that normalizes sexuality of any type.
Philosopher Michel Foucault posits that there is a subtle but essential difference between resemblance and similitude. Resemblance results in something that is familiar, but still fundamentally “other.” It is a faithful copy, but a copy nonetheless. There is still a sense of order at play with the original maintaining superiority over the representation of the original. Similitude, on the other hand, begins to grasp at the true sameness of things. It is the difference between being like the original and being equal to the original. With representations of bisexuality such as we see on Revenge and Orange is the New Black, characters such as Nolan and Piper achieve a state of resemblance, but not similitude, remaining in some ways inferior. They are visible and compelling, but marked with the difference of the “other” that we do not fully understand. Stereotyping, marginalization, and condemnation result from an inability to present bisexual individuals as people who are still fundamentally the same as their counterparts, just with different characteristics.

Transparent, however, manages to give Sarah and Ali true similitude. They are not simply like Nolan and Piper, who are visible but painted as defective because of their sexuality. The sisters actually are equal to the other characters on the show, with bisexuality functioning as an intrinsic piece of each woman’s persona, but by no means the most important part. It is in this achievement of similitude that we finally satisfy the other requirement of Fisher’s narrative paradigm. With Sarah and Ali, Transparent achieves narrative fidelity in regard to bisexuality. They are recognizable as fellow human beings above all else, a

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97 Michel Foucault, This Is Not a Pipe, trans. James Harkness, Quantum Books (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983).
distinction that makes them and their stories feel real. They move beyond mere entertainment and resonate with audiences as familiar and conceivable, rather than alien and unreal, and suddenly it is possible to understand them as people with whom we have more in common than we originally thought. Only then do the arbitrary boundaries that divide factions begin to disappear.

Portrayals such as those on Revenge and Orange is the New Black represent significant phases in the evolution of bisexuality narratives. It is not possible to have complexity without visibility or acceptance without depth. Each show marks important progress toward the ultimate goal of realistic and accurate narratives of bisexuality. Transparent, however, is the beginning of what will eventually result in true progress toward equality. But it is only a start. One show cannot outweigh hundreds of other problematic narratives that saturate current societal perception. In the future, we must do better. We must support and encourage narratives that are real and honest. We must give people the stories they need in order to understand and be comfortable with people of all walks of life, including those who identify as bisexual. It is not enough to be visible. We must also be comprehensible. For it is only through making narratives accessible and understandable that bisexuality will truly find its alibi.
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Curriculum Vitae

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Education:
• Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, North Carolina (2014-Present)
  Master of Arts in Communication
• Wingate University, Wingate, North Carolina (2003-2007)
  Bachelor of Arts in English
  Minors: Mathematics and Professional & Technical Writing

Teaching Experience:
• Wake Forest University; Winston-Salem, NC (8/2014-Present)
  Teaching Assistant (COM 110 – Public Speaking, COM 370 – Special Topics)
  ~ Work with undergraduate classes each semester as an assistant to the professor
  ~ Responsibilities include class/lab instruction, grading, and additional work with students individually as needed
• Wake Forest University (7/2015-Present)
  Academic Tutor, Student Athlete Services
• Wingate University; Wingate, North Carolina (1/2004-5/2007)
  Peer Tutor

Professional Experience:
• NBCC Foundation; Greensboro, NC (1/2016-Present)
  Communications Graduate Assistant
  ~Provide assistance to the Communications Officer with assignments including press release creation, copyediting, social media management, marketing, and other projects as needed for the Foundation’s communication operations
• Easter Seals UCP North Carolina & Virginia; Shelby/Winston-Salem, NC (8/2007-8/2014)
  Program Supervisor – Individual and Community Supports (9/2010-8/2014)
  ~Supervised direct care staff providing home and community support services to individuals with disabilities
  ~Coordinated services with case managers, individuals, families, and staff to insure that services provided were in accordance with best practice standards
  ~Implemented and supervised the new community guide program following the statewide implementation of Innovations services in February 2012
  ~Supervised a team of Job Coaches and Community Resource Trainers
~ Responsibilities included managing program finances, budgeting, coordinating consumer referrals, working with external stakeholders, overseeing documentation procedures, scheduling, preparing billing, and other managerial tasks as needed

~ Assisted individuals with disabilities (both mental health and developmental disabilities) in finding and retaining employment in a competitive job market
~ Helped to develop techniques that allowed individuals to train and work in a manner tailored to their specific needs

Freelance Layout Editor
~ Designed layouts for journal articles
~ Communicated with authors to edit articles for publication
~ Maintained detailed records of article specifications, communication with authors, and progress towards publication

Assistant Editor and Student Intern
~ Designed layouts and proofread articles for journal publication
~ Communicated with authors and publisher to resolve publication issues
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• Wingate University; Wingate, North Carolina (8/2006-5/2007)
English Department Office Assistant
~ Researched topics for professors for class discussions
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