

AMERICAN NATIONHOOD IN TRANSITION: SEXUAL ORIENTATION, RACE AND THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of race, ethnicity and sexuality circumscribes the boundaries of American identity. Historically, homosexuality was tethered to unpopular racial, ethnic, and ideological minorities. In recent years, mainstream film and television have contributed to redefining non-heterosexual peoples' place in the American national imagination: from outcast to partial insider. While the history of the LGBT movement is replete with racial and ethnic diversity, the US popular media have repeatedly emphasized one dimension--its whiteness. As homogenizing agents, the media have helped to generate a false image of an ethnically and racially homogeneous LGBT community. In this paper we examine popular television and films' changing depictions of sexual minorities. We contend their quasi-accepted status comes at the cost of reinforcing whiteness as the apex of American authenticity.

Keywords: American identity; Film; Homonationalism; Race; Television.

INTRODUCTION

As all social phenomena are inherently multifaceted, scholars have long argued that any thorough analysis must consider how these elements intersect with one another generating intersections that may appear contradictory (Crenshaw 1991; Hindman 2011). In that spirit, we understand that race, ethnicity, and sexuality intersect in the fluctuating parameters of American nationhood. We examine this dynamic process by focusing on perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in the United States in television and film. Historically, sexual minorities were tethered to *un-American* and *undesirable* racial, ethnic, and ideological minorities (Canada 2009; Conrad 2001; D'Emilio 1992; Somerville 2000). In recent years, however, the popular media have helped redefine the image of LGBT people. The homophile and

gay liberation movements of the twentieth century were replete with racially and ethnically diverse activists. Ignoring that diversity, US popular media recurrently showcase one portion: its white segment. Effectively, the media have helped incorporate sexual minorities via a highly-racialized portal that finds the LGBT community worthy of acceptance by presuming they are *more like us* than are people of color.

THE CONTOURS OF AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

The nation—a polity justified on the basis of peoplehood—has become the most legitimate source of political sovereignty since the late eighteenth century (Connor 1994, 80). Although engineered (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), mythmakers present it as an organic entity (Gellner 1983, 49) by objectifying venerated cultural and ascriptive features aimed at separating *us* from *them* (Hander et al. 1984; Lindholm 2008). The elements elites select to distinguish *us* from *them* are carefully chosen to safeguard elites' in-group privileges (Barreto 2001; Dragojević 2005; Wimmer 2008). Concurrently, this process also foments intragroup hierarchies that differentiate the authentic vs. the inauthentic, the pure vs. the impure, or the worthy vs. the undeserving (Barreto and Lozano 2017; Barreto and Napolio 2020; Billé 2010; Jones 2016). Traditionally, nationalism empowered straight men over women and gay men (Greenberg 2005; McClintock 1993; Nagel 2000) and, in the Americas, whites over nonwhites (Guss 2000; Kaufmann 2019; Sawyer 2006).

Scholarship on American national identity falls into three main schools of thought: the civic, the ethnic, and a hybrid variant. The civic camp, the country's official *creed* of equality and liberty, rejects any ancestral qualifications (Kohn 1957; Lipset 1990; Spalding 2009). Consistently, this approach has failed to explain historic anomalies such as slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples (Edwards and Weiss 2011; Lipsitz 2006; Smith, R. 1997) all the while clinging to the "mythic march of progress and prosperity at home, as to the noble effort to export democracy abroad" (Giroux 1995, 45). Of the three approaches, the civic is the most *liberal* interpretation of US national identity.

Alternatively, others claim American identity is ethno-racial. Nineteenth-century nativists limited American authenticity to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Their twentieth-century counterparts expanded its parameters, claiming that the US is “European and Christian” (Buchanan 2011, 2) or “Judeo-Christian” (Gingrich 2011, 100). While European immigrants to the US were compelled to join this new collective identity (Steinberg 1981, 42), non-whites were cast out (Baldwin 1988, 56; Olson 2004, 54). The ethnic camp is, therefore, the narrowest of all three and the most conservative, if not reactionary.

Placed between the civic and ethnic camps is the hybrid approach. Combining ethnic and civic features, this model is truly an amalgam—an identity based on “multiple traditions” (Smith 1993, 550). Alternatively, Kaufmann (1999 439; 2000 134) conceived Americanism as a nested identity, namely as a civic layer covering an ethnic core. In this light, as Kaufmann sees it, the hybrid identity is sham because what one is left with in reality is an ethnic identity in a civic guise.

National identities rely upon “constructions of gender” (McClintock 1993, 61). Through the state-sanctioned institution of marriage, women’s subordination was regarded as a “natural fact” and a form of “hierarchy within unity” (McClintock, 1993, 64). All identity groups—whether racial, ethnic, confessional or national—are based on heterosexist gender inequality (Richardson 1998, 38-39), and nationalists have employed racism, homophobia and misogyny to juxtapose the righteous or worthy national from those they deemed inferior (Bjork-James 2020, 58-59; Nagel 2000, 119). Sexual minorities were relegated to a subservient status (Billé 2010, 195) owing to their “partial citizens” reputation (Richardson 1998, 88).

The American public at large was largely unaware of gay *communities* until the Cold War, and when the topic arose it did so in the context of criminality or mental illness. As “sexual difference” equaled “sexual deviance” (Billé 2010, 192), homosexuality was deemed a blight on the face of bourgeois nationalism (Conrad 2001, 125). During the Second World War, the armed forces began to expel suspected gays and lesbians from the military in large numbers, and in the 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy launched his notorious witch hunts where he deemed gay *pink* as simply another shade of Marxist

red (D'Emilio 1992, 58-60). In the popular imagination, sexual deviance was associated with maligned groups such as immigrants and racial minorities (Canaday 2009, 29, 55; Conrad 2001, 133-134; Somerville 2000).

Gay and lesbian activists borrowed liberally from the Civil Rights movement's well-honed rhetorical and political frameworks (Adam 2003, 271). Forging alliances with nonwhite activists intensified in the 1960s as activists from the Gay Liberation, Black Nationalist, and Latino movements advocated greater collaboration (Armstrong 2002, 20; Newton 2009, 153-155; Retzliff 2007, 146). Not everyone, though, celebrated black alliances with the gay community. Socially conservative elements in the black community shunned collaboration with homosexual organizations (Hill 2013). Still, that opposition did not prevent a new generation of black, straight politicians, who came into their own in the 1980s, from embracing gay rights for strategic reasons (Stewart-Winter 2016, 6). Calls for greater intergroup cooperation fed the false impression that membership in sexual and ethno-racial communities were mutually exclusive, thus fomenting the stereotype that gays were "implicitly white" (Murib 2016, 49). Adding to this sense of mutual exclusivity, it was not infrequent for white gay folks to exclude gay people of color from their spaces (Bérubé 2001; Duberman 2018, 40-41).

THE NATION AND THE MEDIA

Topmost among nationalists' mythmaking instruments is the state apparatus. In this framework, academic literature has equally gravitated towards studies focusing on the state's role in generating, promoting, and disseminating national identities (e.g., Bulag 1998; Danforth 1995; Lynch 1999). Indeed, governments have at their disposal numerous socializing agents, particularly school textbooks—the primary tool for inculcating the next generation of citizens with the official national narrative (Kaplan 2006, 78; Moreau 2003; Williamson 2014, 1). However, Anderson (1983, 74-77) did not overlook the power of the mass media in forging and disseminating national identities. The mass media "produce fields of definition and association, symbolic and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete" (Gitlin 1980, 2). While newspapers were crucial to diffusing American national identity in an earlier era (Smith-Rosenberg 2010,

22-23), television has become the new “national cultural meeting place” (Walters 2001, 27).

What kind of identities are the media circulating? Critics on the political right accuse the U.S. mainstream media of a leftist bias (Goldberg 2002, 12; Novak 1996, 151). While Romney (2010, 47) complained about the leftist “media elite,” Palin (2010, 53) attacked the unholy leftist cabal of “the self-described truth tellers of Washington, the main-stream media, Hollywood, and academia” who all conspire to “demonize Christianity and America’s traditional values.” Similarly, Buchanan (2011, 49) castigates the “anti-Christian elite ruling the academy, Hollywood, and the arts.” For the political right, the mainstream media are the shock troops of a left-wing conspiracy attacking American values.

Most academics contend that claims of media bias are a hallmark of right-wing partisans (Lee 2005, 58; Watts et al. 1999, 166). Domke and co-authors (1999, 50) suggest that conservative allegations of media bias are tactically employed to seize “control over their message.” They are intended to subdue “journalism’s watchdog function” (Alterman 2003, 266). Even the most left-leaning portions of the mainstream media advocate a reformation of capitalism, not a displacement of it. In fact, as a profit-making industry, the mass media endeavor to skew the political conversation’s right of center (Alterman 2003, 24, 259; Herman and Chomsky 2002, 18; Sykes 2017, 16). The mass media’s business interests shape our political discourse to such a degree that we often fail to perceive it (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 302). To maximize audience and readership, the mass media generate an oversimplified and homogeneous national identity (Calabrese and Burke 1992, 69; Fiske 2011, 37, 158).

Examining media bias is crucial to understanding the kind of national identity they generate. If the mainstream media have a liberal penchant, they would broadcast a civic interpretation of American national identity. Alternatively, most academics presume the media’s bias is conservative. Historically, that meant articulating a series of hierarchies: white over non-white, Christian over non-Christian, the pious over the secular, and straight over queer.

LGBT REPRESENTATION IN TELEVISION AND FILM

At the peak of the AIDS pandemic, media depictions of gays and lesbians reflected a toxic environment where homophobia was given a freer hand than prejudice toward racial minorities (Gross 1991, 26). “More often than not, lesbians and gays have been depicted in coded terms, their identity hidden from mainstream viewing and knowable only to the astute (often gay) filmgoer. Otherwise, gays entered the silver screen as tortured, self-loathing creatures of an exotic and dangerous subculture” (Walters 2001, 131). More often than not, the media chose to remain silent, confirming the role omissions serve, as one of the most effective means to suppress historic representation (Behdad 2005; Trouillot 1995).

While censors endeavored to render gays and lesbians invisible, there were films in the 1930s and 1940s that used the “sissy” or “pansy” to hint at a gay male character – thespian foils to help solidify the preeminence of the masculine, American leading men (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 366; Russo 1987). While tomboys did not present the same threat to American identity and masculinity as sissies did, they still subverted orthodox sex roles. Reinforcing classic masculine tropes, both sissies and tomboys presented a character against whom societal norms could be measured (Russo 1987, 63). Censorship decreased as the Production Code—the industry’s moral guidelines—lost sway in the 1960s. The Motion Picture Association of America stated that homosexuality, or “sex perversion” could be mentioned so long as it was handled “with care, discretion, and restraint” (in Russo 1987, 121). To the degree they were presented at all, gays and lesbians were staged as unidimensional characters (Russo 1987, 248).

In the 1960s, the mass media opened the proverbial closet door. In 1964 *Life* magazine issued a series on homosexuality in San Francisco—a move that precipitated a gay *stampede* into the City by the Bay (Boyd 2003; Sides 2009, 84; Stryker and Buskirk 1996, 4). Noted journalist Mike Wallace narrated an hour-long *CBS Special Report* entitled “The Homosexuals” (Gray 2009, 150). The first gay character on network television was a blackmail victim on the pilot episode of the crime drama *N.Y.P.D.* (“Shakedown” 1967). A few years later, an episode of *All in the Family* featured a gay football player, and in an episode of *Marcus Welby, MD* our venerable physician was assigned to “cure” a patient afflicted with homosexuality (Walters 2001, 60).

Representation of gays and lesbians on television were cyclical rather than static (Capsuto 2000). The high point of the 1970s was followed by a decline in the 1980s, coinciding with the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic, and by an upturn in the 1990s—a reflection of limited successes in the political arena, and greater acceptance in the workplace (Chasin 2000, 29). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, popular television programs such as *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Six Feet Under* were centering on gay and lesbian characters. While these shows are not without criticism (Chambers 2009; Demory and Pullen 2013), they were important from a representational standpoint.

The improved standing of the LGBT Americans is associated with their commodification (Badgett 1997, 66-67; Campisi 2013, 49; Chasin 2000, 35-41, 125). It is also associated with AIDS. At the height of the pandemic middle-class, white gay men successfully used their class and racial privileges to publicize their plight, thus further linking in the popular imagination gayness with whiteness (Kohnen 2016, 72-74). The *new homonormativity* “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but up-holds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumptions” (Duggan 2003, 50). *Homonationalism* is a “form of sexual exceptionalism” that reinforces entrenched racial and ethnic notions of national belonging (Puar 2007, 2). Similarly, Milani and Levon (2016, 70) described it as a “discursive process through which both state and non-state actors bring sexual diversity into the very definition of the nation-state so as to legitimise the exclusion and/or repression of others who are portrayed as lacking in this crucial criterion of ‘tolerance of sexual diversity.’” Since the heteronormative state is presumed to be white, so must be heteronormative queerness (Kohn 2016, 28). Let us examine three types of portrayal reflecting a racial-sexual orientation link: inaugurating a founder, depictions of the Stonewall Uprising, and representations of same-sex marriage.

QUEERS IN THE NATION

Anointing a Founder

Analogous to a biological family, nationalist mythmakers reinforce misogyny by insisting on anointing a founding *father*. The US mainstream mass media along with US government officials have consecrated Harvey Milk to that role. Sworn into the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in January 1978, Milk was one of the first openly gay people to run for public office. One of his fellow legislators assassinated him later that year. Posthumously, Barack Obama awarded Milk the Presidential Medal of Freedom (“President Obama” 2009). In 2014, the US Postal Service issued a Harvey Milk commemorative stamp, making him the first openly LGBT official to receive that honor (Thomas 2014). And in 2016 the US Navy announced plans to name a ship in his honor (LaGrone 2016).

Why should Milk receive more attention than his predecessors, including José Sarria and Harry Hay? Sarria ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961, the first campaign run by an openly gay person in the US (Boyd 2003, 60; Stryker and Buskirk 1996, 42-43). Although Sarria was a strong and early supporter of Milk’s campaign (Shilts 1982, 75), and was “secured a revered place in pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian history,” as Retzlöff underscored (2007, 148), he still remains, unlike Milk, a largely unknown figure. Retzlöff (2007, 143) suggested that Sarria’s ethnicity—Latino—may have played a role in downplaying his legacy. His gender-nonconforming history as a drag performer was likely another factor contributing to his unknownability (Hirshman 2012, 87). Harry Hay co-founded the Mattachine Society—one of the earliest LGBT organizations—in 1950 (D’Emilio 1992), and the Radical Faeries in 1979 (Kilhefner 2010, 21). Like Sarria, Hay challenged mainstream gender norms, and in his youth was a member of the Communist Party. Capitalism’s opponents have been disqualified from holding the privileged position of national leaders in the US.

Unlike Sarria and Hay, Milk came closest to the American ideal. Milk’s *sanitized* image fits the mold of a model American: “white, middle class, gender normative, able-bodied, and male” (Murib 2016, 4). He was a military veteran and a small business owner. Homonormativity does not challenge traditional heteronormative assumptions;

it caves into their neoliberal, depoliticizing demands (Ammaturo 2016, 38; Duggan 2002, 179; Murib 2016, 49).

We see Harvey Milk's *suitability* in the Oscar-winning 2008 biopic *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Dustin Lance Black. Milk's assassination opens and closes the film, thus emphasizing the subject's premature death by situating him in the sepulcher of American martyrs who died before their visions were fully realized (Villa 2010). Equating "gay" with "white," Milk also erases the diversity within San Francisco's LGBT community (Dillard 2017; Lenon 2013). By omitting the Tenderloin's transgender population and the Mission District's gay Latino community, by default, the film makes the Castro, "a monolithic emblem of all queer history in San Francisco" (Dillard 2017, 3). Lenon (2013) compares the film's depiction of the fight against Proposition 6 (an effort to ban homosexuals from teaching children) with the fight against Proposition 8 (which, successfully, banned same-sex marriage) that was going on before and after the time surrounding the film's release. The film's sole portrayal of a lesbian—Milk's campaign manager Anne Kronenberg—minimizes both the role of lesbians in San Francisco's LGBT community in the 1970s, and their role in Milk's political rise (Lenon 2013, 47). Founding mothers—including Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, co-founders of the Daughters of Bilitis—take a back seat to founding fathers. That is, if they are even allowed in the vehicle at all.

People of color are also nearly absent. Other than Milk's second romantic interest in the film—Jack Lira (Latino)—none are significant or developed characters. As Dillard (2017, 5) says, *Milk* "deploys ethnicity as a punchline rather than an integral component of the city's identity." While Lira's relationship with Milk is given "little or no validity," and is seen as a hindrance to Harvey's political career, Milk's relationship with his first lover, Scott Smith, who is white, is portrayed as "true love" (Lenon 2013, 47).

This erasure is compounded by the timing of the release and the immediate aftermath of the passage of Proposition 8. Lenon (2013) contends the LGBT community attempted to blame black voters for Proposition 8 even though marriage-equality proponents failed to do sufficient outreach to non-white communities. In addition, as

film critic Armond White (2008) wrote: “focusing on Milk gives the movement a white idol. It’s a mainstreaming ploy.” *Milk*, and thus Milk, are made palatable to the mainstream by fitting into the standard conception of American identity, and by emphasizing Milk’s whiteness, middle class respectability, moderately progressive politics, and masculinity (Dillard 2017).

Stonewall: The Riots and the Films

Nationalist mythmakers need to hallow one fragment in time as the group’s *golden age* (Renan 1990; Smith, A. 1997). For instance, while Americans extol their country’s birth on July 4, 1776, the bullets started flying fourteen months earlier at the Battles of Lexington and Concord. One cannot glorify the past without juxtaposing it to a *less-than-magnificent* present (Thapar 2000, 17). A disdain for the secular, multicultural, multiracial, and urban present attracted many white American nationalists to Donald Trump’s idealized pre-Civil Rights era (Gorski 2017). Québécois nationalists set their golden age in colonial, Catholic, New France (Handler 1988, 5). In Spain, the *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Century) was in the 16th century (Kohn 1967, 154-155). When was the gay golden age?

New York City Police stormed the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, in the early hours of June 28, 1969. Its location at the hub of major transportation lines, its proximity to many gay cruising areas, and its longevity made it a popular watering hole with a diverse clientele (Carter 2004, 11; Faderman 2015). In that era, raids on gay and lesbian bars were not uncommon (Armstrong and Crago 2006; Hirshman 2012). But that evening, the patrons and local street youth fought back, triggering the famous Stonewall Riots. The following year activists commemorated the event with the first Gay Pride march (Bruce 2016). Although celebrated around the world on different days, Gay Pride remains *the* high-holy day on the LGBT calendar (Armstrong and Crago 2006, 725; Hodges and Hutter 1979, 20).

Few have had as dramatic an impact as President Barack Obama in elevating the Stonewall’s place in the official nationalist narrative. He designated the area around the Stonewall a National Monument—the first LGBT site to gain that level of federal

recognition. In his Second Inaugural Address, Obama linked Selma, Seneca Falls, and the Stonewall as the embodiments of the civil rights', women's rights', and gay rights' movements. It is clear that the legacy of the Stonewall Riots continues to grow and remains an important moment in the movement's history (Duberman 1994; Faderman 2015; Frank 2014).

Interestingly, the 1969 Stonewall Riots were not the first time the LGBT community challenged police abuse. On January 1, 1965, police raided San Francisco's New Year's Ball, a fundraising event featuring drag queens. In 1966, at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco, a riot involving many members of the transgender community broke out (Armstrong and Cragg 2006, 733; Carter 2004, 109-110). Again, in 1967, in Los Angeles, there were riots at the Black Cat Tavern.

Depictions of the Stonewall Riots have limited the role non-white, non-gender conforming, working-class people played in the uprising (Kohnen 2016, 18). There are two primary published accounts of the Stonewall riots. Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* (1994) provides a rich history of riot participants and the organizing that both preceded and followed it. David Carter's *Stonewall* (2004) focuses more on the riots themselves. Carter's account carries more breadth in describing the people involved that night, whereas Duberman goes into significantly more depth on a smaller number of riot participants. In terms of race, both note individual accounts of non-white rioters. According to Carter, most of the rioters were young, white, from middle class families, but living closer to the margins of society. Others dispute this, emphasizing the role of people of color, women, and the transgender community.

The Stonewall Riots have been depicted in two key feature films. Despite a limited release, the first—a British film directed by Nigel Finch in 1995—received generally positive reviews. The second—an American film directed by Roland Emmerich and released in 2015—opened to wider release, but proved to be a flop, critically and commercially. Emmerich seems to draw much of his source material from Carter's *Stonewall*. The director faced significant criticism for both whitewashing the riots and downplaying the role drag and transgender communities played that night, among other inaccuracies (Reynolds 2016; Smith 2015). The director asserted that he

was not making a film for the LGBT community alone, but rather for the entire American community. According to Emmerich, straight audiences could relate to Danny, the lead character, because he was white, middle class, and straight-acting (Keating 2015). Additionally, Danny is not from New York City; he arrives there from the heartland. Emmerich's belief that for *Stonewall* to be accessible to mainstream audiences it must center on a heteronormative lead reflects the way LGBT people must be perceived by the mainstream in order to be considered part of American society.

Emmerich *did* attempt to diversify the cast. Marsha P. Johnson, a black, transgender drag queen, appears in several scenes. She does not, however, play a central role in the dramatic events. Another character, Ray—effeminate, homeless, and a hustler—seems loosely based on Sylvia Rivera. He is, however, neither portrayed as trans nor as drag queen. Although apolitical, his character does participate in the riots. One final character, Cong, another member of the group of street kids that Danny befriended, is black and more feminine. But, again, he is not clearly portrayed as trans or a drag queen. As the riots and surrounding story unfold, the focus remains on Danny—the straight-acting, white, mainstream lead character. Danny is *on* the street, but not *of* the street.

Let us juxtapose Emmerich's 2015 American interpretation of the Stonewall Riots with the 1995 British film directed by Nigel Finch. The film's credits note that it is based on Duberman's *Stonewall* book. Like the 2015 Stonewall film, Finch's involves a traditionally masculine, white male arriving in New York City, going to Greenwich Village and socializing with a group that frequents the Stonewall bar. Although this character, Matty, gets involved with a member of the Mattachine Society, he appears too radical for this organization. This being said, the British film presents itself much more racially diverse than its American counterpart. Matty's romantic interest is a femme Latino, La Miranda, who frequents the Stonewall. Bostonia, a black trans woman, has her own story arc and, central to the plot, throws the first punch the night of the riots. This is noticeably different from the later movie. In Emmerich's version of the riots, the black character literally hands a brick to the heteronormative white lead to throw.

The background actors in the earlier film are also racially diverse and highlight the drag and transgender community more prominently than the more recent film. The characters in the 1995 *Stonewall*, unlike its film successor, reject the limited definition of what it means to be American. As Miranda says in the film, drag queens are as American as apple pie. Both the 1995 and 2015 films emphasize the differences between the traditional American ideal of masculine, white, middle class respectability and the gay subculture of New York City in the 1960s. The 1995 UK film succeeds in questioning—and to an extent celebrating—those differences while its 2015 US counterpart privileges a more conventional American identity.

Marriage, Citizenship, and the LGBT Rights Movement

Equality of citizenship remains a core facet of the civic interpretation of American national identity: that equality was centered on institutionalized heterosexual privilege (Brandzel 2005, 172; Richardson 1998, 88-90). Yamin (2012) outlined the history of marriage in the United States as a political institution tied to citizenship. Prior to the Civil War, the marriages of enslaved people were not legally recognized. As immigration law developed, marriage was used to further define who was properly American and who was not. American men who married foreign women retained their citizenship, and gave citizenship to their new wives. American women who married foreign men, on the other hand, lost their citizenship (Cott 1998; Gardner 2005). These gendered differences further emphasize the masculine nature of American identity.

Like marriage, weddings are also important cultural and legal markers (Ingraham 2008, 7). Many couples go into significant debt to finance these elaborate status-symbol rituals. Newspapers routinely feature wedding announcements. Including gay and lesbian couples in the *New York Times* wedding announcements reflects a growing acceptance of same-sex couples. But, perhaps more importantly, it also situates these couples into traditional heteronormative institutions (Ingraham 2008, 160). In the LGBTQ community, discussions of same-sex marriage date back to the 1950s (Frank 2017), and attempts to legalize same-sex marriage date back to the 1970s (Frank 2017). These early efforts did not gain much traction.

Legal recognition of same-sex marriage ultimately culminated in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 United States Supreme Court decision that required all states, pursuant to the 14th Amendment, to provide gay and lesbian couples equal access to marriage. This campaign was for entry into one of the central markers of full participation in American society (Kammerer 2016). Rather than embrace marriage rights, some in the LGBT community advocated a more liberationist view—one that questioned any kind of marriage (Ettelbrick 1989). At the same time, most conservatives saw marriage equality as a symbol of national decline (Yamin 2012, 100).

Representation of same-sex marriage has a long history on television. The early references to same-sex unions were not accounts of formal legal marriage. Instead, they were representations of a culturally significant relationship akin to marriage, often accompanied by a wedding party. The earliest example aired in 1976 on NBC's *Sirota's Court* where the judge marrying the male couple pondered its legality ("Court Fear" 1976). Given that the networks were not willing to go too far, the couple's ceremony ends with a handshake and not a kiss (Capsuto 2000). Another example traces back to 1977 specifically from *All in the Family* where the characters Edith and Archie Bunker attend the funeral of Edith's cousin Liz, who, Edith learns, was a lesbian. Liz's "roommate" explains their relationship to Edith by saying it was "like a marriage" ("Cousin Liz" 1977). The focus here was not on the legal standing of their relationship but familial and social acceptance. These episodes aired at a time when significant news coverage of attempts by gay and lesbian couples from the US to marry in several states were being undertaken (Lichtenstein 1975, 49).

In the 1990s, the question of same-sex marriage was again in the news as Hawaii's courts seemed poised to mandate recognition of same-sex couples' right to marry. *The Golden Girls* broached the subject through Blanche's brother, Clayton ("Sister of the Bride" 1991). Two of the characters on *Northern Exposure* have a commitment ceremony ("I Feel the Earth Move" 1994). *Roseanne* showed the wedding of longtime recurring character Leon to his partner Scott ("December Bride" 1995). *Friends* aired "The One with the Lesbian Wedding" (1996)—the episode where Ross's ex-wife married her new

girlfriend. Despite the progress made in LGBT representations on television since *Sirota's Court* aired in 1976, none of these ceremonies end with a kiss.

Television discussions of same-sex marriage, particularly in the years before legal recognition, often included a character who questions the need for non-straight to wed. On *The Golden Girls*, Blanche is supportive of her brother, but questions his need to marry his partner. In a moving scene between Blanche and Sophia, Sophia asks Blanche why she married her husband. Blanche talks about love and wanting to share a life. Sophia says those are the same reasons why Clayton wants to marry his fiancé. This is quite similar to the *Friends* episode where Ross's ex-wife is marrying her girlfriend. Ross does not understand why they need to marry since they already live together. Monica's reply echoes Sophia's: they want to declare and celebrate their love with the people who matter most to them. Even the episode of *All in the Family* from the 1970s links same-sex relationships to marriage, family, and similarity to heterosexual couples.

Equality of citizenship means the right to marry. Yet, it is important to note that most of these episodes featured white couples. In 1991, on the sitcom *Roc*, viewers did see an interracial gay male couple and their commitment ceremony ("Can't Help Loving That Man" 1991). Such instances of racial diversity in television depictions of same-sex couples are, however, rare. Lists of important same-sex marriages on television published by *Rolling Stone* (Kroll 2013) and *Advocate* (Allen 2014) feature mostly white couples. Neither list featured couples where both spouses are played by people of color. Indeed, in a list of over 100 LGBT couples compiled by *Out* ("A Timeline" 2018), approximately 30 included at least one non-white member. Greater acceptance of gays and lesbians does not trickle down to everyone (Brown 2012, 1065), being that "This benevolence towards sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity" (Puar 2007, xii). The lack of non-white, or interracial, LGBT couples on television reinforce the simple formula equating marriage with citizenship, and citizenship with whiteness and authentic American-ness. Governments and the media exploit homonationalism with its greater tolerance toward sexual minorities to mask

excluding and even repressing unwanted racial and ethnic communities (Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tokens 2011; Milani and Levon 2016; Sekuler 2013).

DISCUSSION

Homonationalism has *reimagined* a nation willing to tolerate, if not embrace, their gay and lesbian brethren. This process was not without precedent. A drawn out and lethargic process annexed non-Protestant, white, Christians into the American fold in the early twentieth century. While commercial ventures welcomed gay and lesbian assimilation into the American mainstream, they did so to confirm the citizen-consumer nexus (Chasin 2000; Richardson 1998). Moreover, as commercial interest in the gay and lesbian market was connected to an increasingly prevalent pattern of niche marketing, media executives considered the queer market too small to target with their programming (Becker 2006, 125, 177). Then who was the primary target of these non-straight characters and plots in mainstream television and film? “Like the liberal concept of tolerance, the trope of the helpful heterosexual offers a reassuring image of an empowered gay-friendly heterosexuality. The notion of tolerance reaffirms heterosexual privilege by positioning heterosexuals as agents, and gays and lesbians as passive recipients of their largesse. Straights tolerate; gays are tolerated (Becker 2006, 191).

Including gay-themes in television and film primarily targets heterosexuals, thus reinforcing their *hip* credentials (Becker 2006, 188, 196). Since the median heterosexual audience member is not a person of color, we should not be surprised that the media have featured gay characters who are “disproportionately white” (Becker 2006, 179). But the media’s audience target is also reflective of the white, male corporate boardroom (Gross 1991, 21). All too frequently, the typical depiction of gays and lesbians in the mass media is the lonely individual—a person devoid of community except among heterosexuals (Becker 2006, 188; Walters 2001, 148).

Greater visibility does not assure equality. The increased presence of sexual minorities in popular culture has not altered sexual minorities’ marginalization in mainstream society (Harris 2009; Walters 2014). As Walters (2014, 263) contended,

tolerance is inherently “circumscribed and doled out.” Similarly, Vaid (1995: 3) warned us: “The liberty we have won is incomplete, conditional, and ultimately revocable.” To the degree that an updated national narrative now accepts sexual minorities, we should not discount the distinct possibility that this whiteness is honorific and impermanent (Ong 2006, 127). If sexual minorities have been welcomed into the fold as *honorary white*, we could also say they have been accepted, for now, as *honorary heterosexuals*.

CONCLUSION

The successes of the LGBT community in merging into the American mainstream cannot be denied. In only a few decades, LGBT people have gone from criminals, deviants, mentally ill, or sinners to legal and social equals. But only for some. Pete Buttigieg’s 2020 presidential campaign is an example of how far the LGBT community progressed toward assimilating into US national identity. His run for the White House also raised important questions about the relationship between LGBT people and that national identity.

For many, Buttigieg represented progress: a gay man who was a serious contender for a major political party’s nomination for president. For others, his campaign highlighted the limits of acceptance. Buttigieg’s race, class, Christian faith, military service and other experiences marked him as closer to mainstream heterosexual society than many in the queer community were. For these people, his prominence demonstrated the price of tolerance. These divergent responses to his candidacy demonstrate the differences between assimilation of gays and lesbians into the national identity, and a more radical liberation from the confines of that national identity.

These differences, we contend, structure how sexual orientation and gender identity fit into the idea of American national identity. Media representations painted a picture, never accurate, of the LGBT community as white, middle class, respectable, and thus, fitting the ideal of American identity. This assimilationist portrayal is what allowed Buttigieg to advance as far as he has in American politics while at the same time limiting the ability of other, more radical, and more queer, people from achieving the same level of success.

The media continues to play a critical role in disseminating and altering national myths. Collectively gays and lesbians are increasingly accepted as integral parts of the nation. But that admission is conditional upon the degree to which they deviate from a pre-established image of American authenticity: Christian, straight-appearing, middle-class, capitalist loving, and, of course, white. Gays-as-Americans is not the fulfillment of the classic Civic Creed. It is only an amendment to a well-entrenched ethno-racial national identity that privileges particular racial, confessional, and ethnic groups above others, even if they're queer. Despite critics' assertion of a liberal bias, the media have demonstrated, in the case of sexual minorities, a penchant to eschew the promise of equality found in the civic creed in favor of the latest amendment to a well-established ethnic and racial hierarchy.

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