

Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV

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Using the American series Queer as Folk (QAF) as a lens into queer televisual representation, this article undertakes a political economic analysis of the show's production and combines it with existing textual analyses of the series, in order to argue that the quest for "valuable" demographics privileges viewers—gay and straight—with access to race, class, and male privilege, and leads to whitewashed representations of affluent, gender normative, gays and lesbians. Seeking to explore the implications of such claims, I take up Fejes's (2000) notation that "the media [are] part of the larger social process of creating identities for lesbians and gays" and offer a qualitative analysis of audience research involving a small sample of avid Canadian viewers of QAF. Among these viewers, white, middle-class, gay, and questioning men were most likely to validate, experience, and forge personal and collective gay identities in relation to the series. That is to say, those non-heterosexual viewers most likely to be deemed valuable by Viacom were best able to validate existing gay identities and "come out" in relation to QAF. This research points to the ways in which gays, lesbians, and queers who fall outside of demographics assessed as "valuable" may continue to be excluded from popular representation and the apparently validating experience of consuming commodified versions of "oneself" on television.

Keywords: television; niche marketing; lesbian and gay identities; Queer as Folk; audience reception

Queer as Folk (Cowen & Lipman, 2000–2005), a dramatic and rather "soapy" series, featured an ensemble cast of seven white, gay and lesbian characters who had gay and lesbian friends, a larger queer community, and sex—plenty of sex.¹ Clearly, at least on the face of it, this was a different televisual representation of gays and lesbians than

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had been depicted prior to 2000. In fact, prior to the 1970s, representations of gays and lesbians were largely absent from U.S. television. The rare depictions that did exist cast them as pathological and criminal (Sender & Jhally, 1998). The growing lesbian and gay liberation movement resulted in the first sympathetic representations of gay and lesbian characters on the small screen in the 1970s, although with a persistent tendency to limit them to the roles of victim, villain, or comic relief (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001).² These stereotypical tropes endured for three decades, and television viewers grew accustomed to seeing the occasional solitary and predominantly chaste, white, middle-class, gay man or lesbian in weekly sitcoms or made-for-TV movies. Even the first two broadcast network sitcoms to feature lesbian and gay leading characters, *Ellen* (1994–1998) and *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), kept to the “comic relief” pattern of representing white, middle-class, gay and lesbian characters as lovable, amusing, and mildly neurotic: all talk and no action. Within this context, Showtime’s cable series *Queer as Folk* (*QAF*) appeared different in many respects. While it primarily maintained the representation of gays and lesbians as white and affluent, the series featured *many* gay and lesbian characters who formed a clique within a larger queer community. Furthermore, beyond depicting love, intimacy, and sex between same-sex partners, the characters enjoyed public sex, sex with strangers, polyamorous relationships, sex for pay, bondage, discipline, and sado-masochism to name only a few of the non-normative sexual practices represented on the series. *QAF* (U.S.) quickly became the number one rated show on Showtime in the United States and number two on Showcase in Canada (Underwood, 2002).

The program’s popularity and its selective challenges to earlier tropes make it a promising site at which to study televisual representation and how viewers respond when groups that have been marginalized and stereotyped within popular culture become privileged enough to be represented differently. While entering popular culture is undeniably an important political objective for a marginalized group in terms of visibility, it also marks a moment of commodification: identities have the potential to create profits for large media conglomerates such as Viacom, which owns niche market television networks including Showtime, LOGO for “LGBT viewers,” and Black Entertainment Television.³ In assessing the current value of the “pink dollar,” for example, LOGO estimates the “gay market” as having “\$835.3 billion in buying power by 2011” (LOGOonline Gay Market Overview, 2010). What is at stake, then, when representations of marginalized groups fall under the direction of mainstream media conglomerates seeking to flatter and court members of such economically “valuable” demographics?

Beginning with a description of the neoliberal corporate context of *QAF* (U.S.), I argue that the quest for “valuable” demographics privileges viewers with access to race, class, and male privilege, and leads to whitewashed images of middle-class, primarily gender normative, gays and lesbians.⁴ I make this argument by undertaking a political economic analysis of the show’s production and combining it with existing textual analyses of *QAF*. Seeking to push this analysis further, I take up Fejes’s (2000) observation that “the media [are] part of the larger social process

of creating identities for lesbians and gays” (p. 115). He is not suggesting a “hypodermic needle” model where media fill passive viewers with beliefs and identities, but rather a postmodern one in which media operate alongside other systems of regulation and control—such as law and medicine—in the production, circulation, and naturalization of discourses concerning sexual identities, practices, and desires. Building on Fejes’s further assertions that “[m]edia images are very powerful in helping one develop a sense of identity” and, more specifically, that “[p]eople ‘coming out’ search the interpersonal and media environment to understand their feelings and sense of difference” (p. 115), I offer a qualitative analysis of audience research involving a small sample of avid Canadian viewers of *QAF* and suggest that, among these viewers, white, middle-class, gay, and questioning men were most likely to validate, experience, and forge personal and collective gay identities in relation to the series. Specifically, those gay and questioning viewers most likely to be deemed valuable by Viacom were better able to produce themselves as gay subjects, and validate their existing gay identities, by watching *QAF*.

Based on these audience reception findings, and in keeping with Fejes’s claims above, I assert that as media conglomerates consolidate the power of popular representation within privatized neoliberal markets, they gain further influence in the production and shaping of the personal and collective identities of their viewers. They produce and widely distribute the representations that ultimately foster greater access to, and validation of, gay subjectivities for privileged queers over others. In turn, we see a further investment in, and entrenchment of, hierarchies of privilege that structure queer communities. It is also worth considering *QAF* and the commodification of gay and lesbian identities in a larger societal context. Changing public opinions, court challenges, the continuation of neoliberal economic frameworks and the increasing privatization of gayborhoods,⁵ in combination with the “discovery” of gay markets and mainstream viewers’ “edgy” tastes, have all been part of a broader movement contributing to the increasing acceptance, not of a complex range of queer identities, but of gays and lesbians who represent the ideal consumer: white, privatized, and affluent.

In the context of television studies, I draw on the recent work of Miller (2009), specifically his vision of “Media Studies 3.0.”⁶ Fundamental to this approach is “a particular focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality in everyday life across national lines” (p. 6), that combines the study of ownership and production with textual analysis and ethnographic research on audiences (see also Miller, 2010). In this spirit, this article addresses and attempts to bridge the institutional context of the production of *QAF*, the text itself, and Canadian viewer responses to a transnational American–Canadian series with its origins in Britain. I point to the limits of gay visibility by exploring how the neoliberal deregulated media markets in the United States produce texts for “valuable” viewers and encourage privileged gay subjectivities.

***Queer as Folk*: From Public-service to “Premium” Television**

QAF began its televisual life in 1999 on Britain’s Channel 4, a publicly funded and profit-oriented broadcast channel introduced in 1982 with a mandate to provide programs for minority groups and those sections of the population “not adequately served by existing channels” (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis, 2002, p. 36). The British eight-part miniseries *QAF* (Shindler & Davies, 1999–2000) was an original drama commissioned within the terms of this public-service mandate (Bignell, 2002, p. 157). With its primary focus on the lives of three white, working- and middle-class gay men, and its disavowal of “positive stereotypes” especially in relation to explicit and non-monogamous gay sexual content (Davis, 2007), *QAF* (U.K.) was unique at least by U.S. standards.⁷ A few minutes into the very first episode, viewers watched 29-year-old Stuart pick up, take home, kiss, rim, and have penetrative sex with 15-year-old Nathan. The British press, sponsors of the series, and a number of Channel 4 viewers offered some unfavorable reactions, as did some “[q]ueer critics and commentators [who] were nervous and concerned about the messages that the series sent out to the wider audience” (Davis, 2007, p. 12).⁸ Yet, even with this critical publicity—or possibly because of it—*QAF*’s popularity stayed strong on a weekly basis, with both gay men and a wider audience.⁹

The original home of *QAF* is notable because this British public-service broadcaster—with its equity mandate—ultimately helped to shape the popular representation of gay men in the United States and Canada. Channel 4 created a show that U.S. and Canadian networks were, prior to that time, not ready or willing to produce. As the success of the British series caught the attention of Hollywood, the cable network Showtime signed on to co-produce a North American version together with Canada’s Temple Street Productions.¹⁰ According to Gross (2001), Showtime was looking to compete with rival HBO’s success with provocative series such as *The Sopranos*, *Oz*, and *Sex and the City*, and *QAF* looked appealing within that context. As a consequence of its groundbreaking content, as well as its popularity and success in Britain, *QAF* found a new home in the profit-driven, niche market of Showtime in the United States.

As should already be apparent, the context out of which *QAF* emerged on Channel 4 was markedly different from its context of recreation on Showtime. Within its public-service regulatory mandate, Channel 4 explicitly prioritized the representation of underrepresented groups, including gays and lesbians. By contrast, while broadcast regulation in the United States prior to the mid 1970s sought to promote diversity and minority perspectives in the name of “the public interest,” the 1980s brought a period of rapid deregulation in favor of a market-driven logic within which popularity and profitability became the determinants of televisual content at the expense of regulations protecting underrepresented groups. This deregulated context of production, in turn, influences who is represented onscreen. The representation of marginalized groups on Showtime occurs incidentally and in the service of courting and pleasing viewers who are valued in economic terms. In the context of neoliberalism and deregulation, then, it has been noted that issues of

underrepresentation are made invisible and representation is privatized and available to those who can afford it (Wible, 2004).

Media Markets and Profitable Margins

Examining the political economy of *QAF* offers insights into how and why new representations of marginalized groups occur in a given economic context. The neoliberal privileging of deregulation, privatization, and value proportional to affluence defines the context of production, appears throughout the text of *QAF*, and is evident in the non-heterosexual viewers who are best able to cultivate identifications and gay identities in relation to the series, extending even to the privatized spaces where some viewers watch *QAF*.

From Marginalized Communities to Valuable Niche Markets

In the absence of regulations to promote the televisual representation of under-represented groups, moving *QAF* across the Atlantic depended, in part, on “narrowcasting” and the pursuit of economically “valuable” minority *and* mainstream viewers. Where broadcasting typically consists of free, terrestrial networks attempting to address and capture mainstream, predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual viewers, cable television introduced narrowcasting whereby specialty channels are geared towards “narrower” taste cultures and previously overlooked groups designated as “minorities” on the basis of race, sex, or sexual orientation (Nightingale, 1996).¹¹ As Arthurs (2003) explains, subscription cable channels—like Showtime—draw

the audience into a different economic relation to the product, where the tastes of audience-as-market, as direct purchasers of the channel, are not as obscured by the normalizing processes of the mass market. This segmentation allows for a pluralism that recognises previously marginalized cultures, albeit by their ability to pay.
(p. 84)

In the deregulated media marketplace, niche market networks allow for representations of marginalized groups. However, Arthurs’s notation—“albeit by their ability to pay”—is central to the decisions made by networks that narrowcast in determining which marginalized cultures will gain representation and, more specifically, which “valuable” segments of a marginalized group will be flattered and courted by the network.

Commercial and cable broadcasters are concerned with the size of a program’s audience *and* the amount of disposable income viewers have to spend. Viewers are hierarchically ranked as “valuable” or not, based on their disposable incomes. As Wible (2004) points out, such priorities can lead to “programming only to young, affluent—and white—audiences” (p. 35). He offers the example of Latinos in the United States who were shown through Nielsen ratings to represent a large percentage of viewers yet were rarely marketed to prior to 2000, because “media executives still

widely perceive[d] that all Latinos are poor” (p. 45). By the same logic, televisual representation prior to the 1990s suggests that gays and lesbians have not always been a valued demographic group. Becker (2004) dates a significant representational shift for gays and lesbians into new prominence to the 1990s when television network executives began to believe that their most valued demographic, 18–34-year-olds, were a “progressive” and “sophisticated” group of liberal-minded viewers who would embrace gay and lesbian characters. In a complementary analysis, Fejes (2000) argues that the discovery that gay men were an attractive consumer market because of their supposedly high-income profiles helped to bring gay characters to the small screen.¹²

Channel 4’s public-service mandate led to the production of a miniseries about gay men that mapped favorably onto the privatized free market model of appealing to “valuable” demographics, including gay-positive straight viewers and supposedly wealthy gay viewers.¹³ Together these market conditions facilitated *QAF*’s move from Manchester to Pittsburgh.

Naughty Network Branding

While *QAF* tapped into the “pink dollar” that Viacom had been pursuing, the series attempted to attract a larger mainstream audience through a \$10 million campaign to promote the first season on Showtime (Elliot, 2000). The series fit within the niche marketing and branding of Viacom’s Showtime network, as well as Showcase, a cable network owned by Canada’s largest media conglomerate Canwest. Consider the connotatively “adult” branding strategies of Showtime and Showcase as represented by their transgressive slogans: “No Limits” and “Television Without Borders.” During the run of *QAF*, Showcase underscored its sexual edginess by broadcasting sex- and queer-themed programs such as *Oz*, *Bliss*, and *KINK*, aimed to appeal ostensibly to a youthful, sexually “adventurous,” queer, and queer-positive audience. An analysis of Showcase print advertisements suggests that the network presented the series under the rubric of providing a “naughty” sexual diversion from white, middle-class norms.

Three ads from the 2004 Showcase print advertising campaign illustrate the brand’s association with sexual subversion. One of the ads in the series features a mid-twenties white male, dressed in business casual clothing, leaping gleefully from his desk in the midst of a labyrinth of cubicles. Over this image is the phrase “I’m gay for a day. Thanks Showcase!” (2004b). Another ad shows office workers making lewd gestures with their bodies, paired with the phrase “We just slept with our boss. Thanks Showcase!” (2004a). Both ads depict conservatively dressed office workers who appear to be cutting loose from their usual, presumably dull, daily grind. A third ad in the series depicts an older, grey-haired, white heterosexual couple lying side by side in bed, wearing modest pajamas, looking directly into the camera and smiling. Over the image is the bondage, discipline, and sado-masochism-tinged phrase, “Showcase is our safe word. Thanks Showcase!” (2004c). The text beneath each ad reads: “Every day countless people push their personal boundaries. If we helped, even just a little, you’re welcome. Showcase—saluting boundary pushers everywhere.” The campaign humorously and consistently positions Showcase as responsible for

presumably “shocking” personal developments, particularly sexual transgressions among “normal,” white, middle-class people.

By offering a fantasy of sexual transgression as a consumable affect for viewers, Showcase’s brand association positions the viewer as normative but with a “naughty” sexual side. It is within this context that *QAF* is positioned as “out of bounds” and exactly where the viewer wants to go. The network’s claim to offer “television without borders” opens the door to programs such as *QAF* that, *in part*, challenge the status quo of television representations. As Wible (2004) asks in his exploration of Showtime’s “No Limits” branding: “Do the ‘endless possibilities’ hint at the depiction of multicultural experiences from the perspective of diverse subjects? Or does the slogan only suggest representations of minority groups and ‘other’ lifestyles that white, moneyed viewers can feel comfortable watching?” (pp. 49–50). In relation to *QAF* and the Canadian Showcase ads, normative boundaries of sex, gender, race, and class are primarily maintained and re-entrenched—providing enough similarity to limit the alienation of “valued” mainstream viewers—while sexual “borders” are transgressed in the quest to provide “edgy” and “provocative” entertainment.¹⁴ The selling of *QAF* and Showcase in these particular ads works, in part, because of the marketing, privileging, and isolating of sexual transgression as a consumable difference that is desirable and “shocking.” The foregrounding of white, middle-class, gender normative characters on *QAF* and in the Showcase ads plays on the tension between the presumed sexual normativity of the white middle-class and “dirty” sexual non-normativity—two supposed opposites—producing the frisson of transgression. In relation to the Showcase branding, the white, middle-class, gays and lesbians on *QAF* can be seen as fresh, yet acceptable, fantasies to titillate and gratify the otherwise normative viewer.

Synergy and Merchandizing

In terms of producing and shaping popular understandings of gays and lesbians, *QAF* (U.S.) falls under the ownership and direction of one of the largest, vertically integrated corporate parent companies in the contemporary U.S. media marketplace. Media deregulation in the United States led to conglomeratization, which further consolidated the power to produce popular representations to fewer and fewer companies, creating synergistic conditions that position products made by vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerates—such as *QAF* within the media conglomerate Viacom—to become prominent and widely accessible within popular culture.¹⁵

Through vertical and horizontal integration Viacom was able to: commission and co-produce *QAF* with Temple Street Productions in Canada; attract subscribers to its network Showtime; advertise the show on Viacom owned billboards in the United States and Canada; syndicate the series on networks worldwide; earn rental and sales income on the *QAF* DVDs through their assets Blockbuster Video and later the LOGO online store¹⁶; and produce the *QAF* coffee-table book and paperback novel series through their publishing house Simon and Shuster.¹⁷ These are only a few

examples of the value added marketing opportunities that media conglomerates can access post-deregulation. In terms of creating and influencing popular understandings of gays and lesbians, the series is greatly privileged over independent queer productions that do not have access to large-scale synergy.

In the absence of regulations concerning the televisual underrepresentation of marginalized groups, the emphasis on narrowcasting and targeting “valuable” audiences offers a context for understanding the profit motives driving the increase in gay and lesbian representation. While media conglomerates seek untapped niche markets to enhance their profits, and networks produce “edgy” programming to keep mainstream viewers interested, “valuable” marginalized groups are increasingly represented, and at times flattered and courted, by mainstream media conglomerates. The deregulated and market-driven context of production influences the content of the texts produced (Wible, 2004; Kellner, 2003), allows conglomerates synergy in the creation, extensive marketing, and distribution of the representations they author, and is evident in the gay and questioning viewers who are best able to cultivate identifications and identities in relation to the series.

Hailing Valuable Viewers

In keeping with media conglomerates’ emphasis on profits and hailing “valuable” viewers—both gay and straight—*QAF* offers a popular representation of gays and lesbians that is overwhelmingly male, white, middle- and upper-class, and gender normative (see Peters, 2009; Farrell, 2006; Jones, 2001; Gamson, 2000).¹⁸ When value is accorded on the basis of disposable income, and race, class, sex, and gender continue to unequally structure access to wealth and privilege, those most likely to be courted, flattered, and placated by conglomerates and networks are viewers with the greatest access to privilege.

Textual readings of the show suggest that beyond asserting sex, race, class, and gender normativity and privilege for gays and lesbians, the series is, arguably, subtly racist and unsubtly sexist (Gamson, 2000). Beirne (2006, 2008) characterizes the series as privileging the narratives and sexualities of gay men over lesbians, and, in relation to class, Cossman (2002) describes the world that gay men inhabit on *QAF* as a “deeply privatized space,” where “the gay male subject comes into being as a privatized consumer of these sexualized spaces and services” (p. 499). In fact, in the move from a public-service network to a solely profit-driven network, the gay and lesbian characters, and queer communities, are generally more affluent than on its British predecessor, pitching the series ever closer to the idealized middle- to upper-class viewer.

Thus, a textual reading informed by political economy suggests that although *QAF*, Viacom, Showtime, and Showcase transgress the limited representations of gay and lesbian televisual characters prior to the 2000s, they simultaneously shore up and re-entrench boundaries between straight and gay, as well as hierarchies of race, class, sex, and gender that structure Canada, the United States, and the diverse queer communities that exist within these neighboring countries. In trying to make money

and create provocative entertainment while avoiding harmful controversy, television networks push some boundaries while nevertheless maintaining others.

What content or textual analysis cannot tell us, however, even when combined with the larger institutional context of the series, is how the text, in turn, informs the knowledge that viewers take from the text and whether this knowledge is used in claiming and constructing identities. The insights from existing content analyses of *QAF* (Beirne, 2006, 2008; Davis, 2007; Farr & Degroult, 2008; Gamson, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Jones, 2001) are enhanced and complemented when placed in dialog with the following audience reception study, as it is apparent that some gay, queer, and questioning viewers—especially “valuable” gay viewers with access to sex, race, and class privilege—are able to use the series to produce and validate personal and collective sexual identities. Having outlined market conditions that contributed to the emergence of *QAF* on American and Canadian networks, I narrow my focus in order to consider how *QAF* was taken up by viewers who are newly valued as a demographic—gay, lesbian, and queer identified viewers.

Shaped by Markets: Shaping Gay Identities and Communities

Drawing on focus groups, interviews, and surveys conducted with 40 avid viewers of *QAF* in Southern Ontario—primarily Toronto—it is clear that personal and community identifications are performed and experienced by viewers through watching *QAF*.¹⁹ *QAF* participates in shaping and validating personal and collective gay and queer identities. Some viewers even “come out” as gay or queer subjects partly in relation to watching *QAF*. This assertion supports Kellner’s (2003) suggestion that popular cultural texts

provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ . . . Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture. (p. 9)

Following Kellner, then, *QAF* is simultaneously shaped by the culture and institutional context out of which it emerges and, in turn, shapes cultural beliefs and identities. The intertwining of pre-existing hierarchies of race, class, sex, and gender, with queer identities and commodification occurs not only “behind-the-scenes” in profit motives and niche marketing, but in front of television screens as well, in part, through the performance of identities leading up to, during, and after watching *QAF*.

While *QAF* and this research study attracted heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and queer identified viewers, I draw here on the responses from 11 gay men, 7 queer women, and 2 lesbian identified viewers. In particular, I highlight how gay male viewer responses compared with the rest of the participants. While queer and lesbian women overwhelmingly disidentified with the representation of lesbians on the series (see

Peters, 2009), and heterosexual women viewers in this study primarily loved the “hot” actors and used the series in building their own queer-positive identities, gay men were more likely than all other viewers to demonstrate pleasurable identifications with the characters—including gay, lesbian, and heterosexual characters—and plotlines, and to use the series in the production, validation, and understanding of their own identities.²⁰ In the interactions between the viewers and the text—including the desires, knowledge, and expectations the viewers bring to their reading of *QAF*—gay viewers deemed valuable by the conglomerate seemed best able to validate and produce themselves as gay identified subjects in relation to their consumption of *QAF*.

Queer Viewers and the Desire for “Self” Representation

The responses of queer, lesbian, and gay identified viewers demonstrate how viewers with non-normative sexual identities tuned in specifically because they were actively looking for images of gays and lesbians onscreen. This suggests that, in part, niche marketing works because some members of marginalized groups are actively and understandably seeking “self” representation. Gay and lesbian identities can be used by corporations and marketers specifically because such identifications are valuable for those who take them up as their own. While network and corporate interests value viewers in economic terms, the following responses demonstrate a range of ways in which gay, lesbian, queer, and questioning viewers valued the series on their own terms.

When asked why they started watching *QAF*, the 20 gay, lesbian, and queer-identified viewers overwhelmingly explained that they wanted substantive gay, lesbian, and queer characters in dramatic and unapologetic narratives within a larger queer community. These three themes dominated descriptions of why queer viewers initially tuned in to *QAF*.²¹ Lesbian identified viewer, Sidney, for example, started watching *QAF* from the first episode. She writes,

I remember being very excited to see a show about gay people. I was pretty young then, and not out too long and I was just so happy to hear that a show about gay people, with actual lives and feelings was going to be airing. (Survey)

Sidney’s feelings of excitement and happiness to simply *hear* about an upcoming series featuring “gay people, with actual lives and feelings” are emblematic of how enthusiastic many gay, lesbian, and queer viewers were to see gay lives on the small screen and how implicitly dissatisfied they were with existing representations. They illustrate Kellner’s point that popular cultural texts “provide materials out of which we forge our very identities” as well as Fejes’s (2000) suggestion that “people ‘coming out’ search the . . . media environment to understand their feelings and sense of difference” (p. 115). These kinds of responses from gay, lesbian, and queer viewers draw attention to the active search some viewers engage in, as they seek out satisfying materials about queer sexualities when they are not readily provided.

Sidney's excitement in seeing such a series complements Ian who also watched *QAF* from the first episode. He writes, "I was interested in a show that would have dramatic stories of queer life" (Survey). These desires for "dramatic stories of queer life" and "gay people, with actual lives and feelings" could ostensibly be satisfied, for example, by a series such as *Six Feet Under*; however, as another participant, Kenneth, articulates, many of the gay, lesbian, and queer viewers were looking for a show not simply featuring gay characters, but one that focused on gay communities. Kenneth writes, "The show began around the same time I had 'come out' to my friends at school. I was excited that there was a television show that was about gay culture and gay life in North America" (Survey). The desires of these viewers point to connections between large-scale representations in popular culture and the personal experience of identifying with a rarely represented and marginalized group. These viewer responses suggest that gay, lesbian, and queer viewers desired queer representation beyond what was offered on television at that time and saw great promise in *QAF*. That said, after tuning in, not all of these viewers enjoyed the series equally, and the cohort most active in producing their sexual identities in relation to the series were young men who were "coming out."

Coming Out with Queer as Folk

Nine of the forty *QAF* viewers who participated in this study said they were questioning their sexuality while watching *QAF* or were recently "out." For seven of these viewers, five of whom were white and middle-class men, *QAF* became a resource for learning about and constituting gay and queer identities.²² Lucas, a young, white, urban, undergraduate student, explained,

I was watching [*QAF*] before I came out, and it was just part of my whole personal identification as a gay man. So, it kind of helped me through all that. It was also a very personal thing too, because I was watching alone. It was part of my personal development. (Focus group)

Similarly, Leo, a young, Asian-Canadian, urban, undergraduate student, describes his viewing history:

I started watching it when I was in grade ten, which is three years ago actually, and it kind of gave me a glimpse of what gay culture would be like, because I wasn't really familiar with it, and I was kind of questioning. It gave me a glimpse of Church Street and what it might be like. (Focus group)

In referring to *QAF*'s "Liberty Street" solely as Toronto's Church Street—a name it is not called on the series—Leo uniquely "glimpsed" not only "gay culture" generally, but also used the series to gain visual and virtual access to the gay district in his own city.

Once again, Kellner (2003) bears repeating: "Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through

the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture” (p. 9). Prior to a more public “coming out,” *QAF* provided these young men with a publicly accessible field—although on a private cable network—where they could privately consume images of “gay culture” and access discourses about gay and lesbian communities and identities. While Lucas and Leo will have had access to discourses concerning gay sexuality and identities outside of *QAF*, their comments suggest that *QAF* offered knowledge that, in turn, was accepted as a form of self-knowledge to which these viewers eventually subscribed. To *subscribe* in this context is first to subscribe to cable in order to view *QAF*, and to subscribe to a dominant version of sexuality as a salient and meaningful identity, which in the case of non-heterosexual identities must be claimed and cultivated. Lucas’s statement that *QAF* “was just part of [his] whole personal identification as a gay man” suggests that *QAF* provided some of the resource material in producing Lucas as a specific *kind* of modern sexual subject—a gay man. As noted before, *QAF* was most readily taken up by male viewers—in this study, five white and middle-class, and one Asian-Canadian and middle-class—in the process of gathering knowledge towards identifying and producing themselves as gay men.²³

Building and Privatizing Community and Collective Gay Identities through Queer as Folk

Watching *QAF* was not strictly a solitary practice used in the production of individual gay identities. Viewers’ use of *QAF* to cultivate and validate gay identities extended to a desire to enjoy queer community together with other *QAF* viewers. Adding a further layer to the intertwining of queer identities and commodification, a desire for collective queer community viewing brought four white, middle-class, gay male participants out to Woody’s—a Toronto gay bar where some of the scenes in the series were shot—to watch *QAF* regularly on Monday nights.²⁴ Viewers who described going to Woody’s were generally older and more monied than those who described “coming out” in relation to *QAF*. The gay men who regularly watched *QAF* at Woody’s all sought a community experience that was specifically based around gay identification. As Ian explains, “We go to Woody’s to share the experience with the community, as it is one of the rare occasions that television caters to queers” (Survey). Similarly, Jack, who was in his early sixties and had moved from a small city in Southern Ontario to Toronto after coming out recently, explained how his Monday nights revolved socially around *QAF*,

For the last three years I’ve watched it at Woody’s, and I think it’s just as much fun sometimes to watch the audience as it is to watch the program. My roommate and I, we have cable, but we make Monday night an outing. Wing night at [a lounge] and then we go across to Woody’s. (Interview)

When I asked Jack—who identified himself as having been heterosexually married before, and for three decades following Stonewall—if *QAF* had “shifted” his view of himself or his identity in any way, he answered, “Just having it out in the open makes

it easier to come out. I came out late in life and certainly when I was growing up there wasn't anything like this" (Interview).

Again, it becomes clear how important this rare depiction of gay life is to *some* of the gay men who watch the series. For Ian and Jack, as well as two other white, middle-class, gay men in this study, going to Woody's facilitated gay personal identity building and maintenance, added a queer community dimension to watching *QAF*, as well as a further privatized class-based dimension. While many straight, gay, queer, and lesbian viewers watched *QAF* with friends at someone's home or alone in their parents' home, gay and queer viewers with some disposable income were better able to access and enjoy the increasingly privatized Toronto gayborhood for the price of a beer or two.²⁵ *QAF*, Woody's, and Toronto's Church Street offer opportunities for queer identification, role modeling, and community building, and they are—at least in part—for profit and privatized consumption. As some white, middle-class, gay, *QAF* viewers with access to disposable income validate and enjoy themselves as members of "the community"—even though they have cable at home—it appears that access to gay and lesbian identities, representations, and spaces is now more readily available to everyone, "albeit by their ability to pay." In keeping with Viacom's aim to attract "the gay and lesbian population . . . with [their] projected buying power of \$485 billion" (Viacom, 2004), this research suggests that among non-heterosexual viewers, gay identified viewers with access to privilege along the lines of sex, race, and class have greatest access to the personal and community identifications that are produced and performed in relation to *QAF*.²⁶

Queer as White, Middle-class, Men Folk

While it is likely that all sexual identities in Canada and the United States are forged partially in relation to popular representations, the recent expansion of representations of gays and lesbians on television means that gay, lesbian, and queer identified viewers can now engage in the practice of identity formation in new ways. But because whiteness and affluence are produced as unmarked "universal" categories, the white, American, urbane, gays and lesbians on *QAF* may come to symbolically stand in for all gays and lesbians—especially for those with no access to, or familiarity with, queers or queer communities (see Peters, 2009). A qualitative analysis of this sample of 40 Canadian viewers of *QAF* suggests that white, middle-class, men were most likely to "come out" and forge a gay identity in relation to the series. The same demographic was also more likely than other viewers to regularly go to Church Street to watch *QAF* at Woody's in a shared, but privatized, community space, in order to enjoy a collective and shared sense of gay identity. In many ways, these patterns are unsurprising given that representations on *QAF* prioritize white, middle-class, gay men over all other queers.

By offering this analysis I do not mean to implicitly suggest that *QAF* or any other queer series must attempt to represent "all queers." Clearly, that is an impossibility given the diversity of queers and queer communities. Nor am I troubled by individual identifications with, or personal and collective gay identities forged in relation to,

QAF. Rather, as long as there is a televisual paucity of American and Canadian representations of queers, queer diversity, and queer communities, and existing representations favor those with privilege, this research points to the ways in which gays, lesbians, and queers who fall outside of demographics assessed as “valuable” may continue to be excluded from popular representation and the apparently validating experience of consuming commodified versions of “oneself” on television.

Through an examination of viewers deemed valuable by media conglomerates, a representation designed to appeal to these valued viewers, and identifications performed and produced in relation to the series, we see a further investment in, and entrenchment of, hierarchies of privilege that structure queer communities. In terms of commodified representations of gays and lesbians, the whiteness and class privilege endemic in *QAF*’s content raises the issue of how the series and viewer identifications with it may entrench limiting and skewed notions of: who can be gay; how to be gay; where gays and lesbians live in the world; and what it means to be gay or lesbian. Since the majority of “LGBT” primetime television characters on cable and broadcast networks were white gay men in 2008–2009 (GLAAD, 2009), 2009–2010 (GLAAD, 2010a), and 2010–2011 (GLAAD, 2010b), these concerns extend beyond *QAF*.

Representations and Rights for Gays and Lesbians “Albeit by Their Ability to Pay”

Recent and ongoing mainstream struggles and victories for “gay rights” in the United States and Canada foreground white, middle-class, monogamous gays and lesbians seeking access to normative structures such as legal marriage—rather than the abolition of marriage, for example—equal spousal benefits, access to becoming adoptive parents, and same-sex couple immigration. While these are, arguably, rights worthy of struggle, it is significant that the project of gender and sexual liberation across race, class, sex, and gender has been publicly sidelined in favor of privatization, consumption, rights, and benefits. In this quest for normative representation and rights, Manalansan (2005) points out, for example, that “people of color are inevitably shunted from the sites of gay mainstream political and cultural desires—the family, marriage, economic stability, and legal personhood” (p. 103). In looking at the white, middle-class, gender-normative representations of gays and lesbians on television, increasing “transformation of gay ghettos into business districts” (Walcott, 2004, p. 36), and U.S. and Canadian court challenges seeking increased legal rights, *QAF* can be situated within a larger pattern whereby marginalized groups are conditionally admitted into the mainstream albeit by their ability to pay and to litigate.

The “pink dollar” niche market and the public fight for equal rights and benefits fit well within neoliberal economic frameworks that seek to offload government expenses onto private citizens. Gays and lesbians in the United States and Canada can have more complex and flattering televisual representations, not through government regulation protecting diversity and “the public interest,” but rather through proving themselves to be valuable, wealthy demographics. As the move from Channel 4 to

Showtime illustrates, the cost of these representations is offloaded from government regulation and onto “valuable” marginalized groups who can pay for popular representation. Meanwhile, marginalized groups who are not recognized as wealthy or valuable demographics are left out of popular representations, and race, class, sex, and gender hierarchies *within* marginalized groups are further entrenched.

Cossmann (2002) makes a related argument about the role of neoliberal economics in the realm of Canadian court challenges. She argues that the Canadian court case *M. v. H.* that opened the door to same-sex marriage fits well within neoliberal frameworks. A lesbian woman took her ex-partner of 10 years to court for spousal support and, for the very first time in Canada, won her case and necessitated the redefinition of marriage. Cossmann suggests that while all previous cases seeking equal marital rights for gays and lesbians were unsuccessful—including access to private bereavement leave and public pension benefits for same-sex spouses—when faced with the prospect of the state supporting *M.* or off-loading this expense onto a private citizen, *H.*, the Supreme Court opted in favor of privatizing the expense. She quotes the Supreme Court decision as “alleviating ‘the burden on the public purse by shifting the obligation to provide support for needy persons to those parents and spouses who have the capacity to provide support to these individuals’ (*M. v. H.* at para. 93. See also at para. 106)” (p. 490). This recognition of lesbian “spouses” by the Supreme Court of Canada opened the door to further, and finally successful, court challenges regarding same-sex marriage, but at what cost?

The supposed “growing acceptance” of gays and lesbians by the mainstream U.S. media and Canadian governments suddenly seems unsurprising and perhaps even pernicious when weighed in relation to the underlying neoliberal economic benefits. *QAF* (U.S.) is emblematic of processes of hegemony and neoliberalism where marginalized groups are invited, or forced in the case of *M. v. H.*, to literally buy their way into the power structure. It is not that we do not need these images or rights, but rather we must be wary of normative structures that use profits and the off-loading of government expenses as the bottom line for offering recognition, representation, and rights to marginalized groups. These capitalist and neoliberal principles impose class-based advancement—which implicitly favors those with race and sex privilege—and leaves many marginalized groups and individuals with little access. Further, in terms of liberal versus radical strategies, the continued strategies of privatization, privileging, and foregrounding of certain gay and lesbian identities within a neoliberal context implicitly summons queers out of a struggle for sexual and gender liberation for all—across categories of difference such as race, class, sex, gender, sexuality—and into established, normative, hegemonic power structures. Such a process is in no way confined to what happens in courtrooms; indeed the dynamics can readily be seen in the ways only some queer viewers can validate their identities and speak themselves into existence as gay through watching *QAF*.

Returning to the more specific relationship between the media conglomerate Viacom, the text, and *QAF* viewers, in a televisual context that offers so few representations of gays, lesbians, queers, and queer communities, the viewers of *QAF* illustrate the personal and collective investments made in this popular

conglomerate-based depiction. When the most readily accessible representations of queers in the United States and Canada are premised on media conglomerates' valuing of privileged gays and lesbians, combined with a financial imperative to draw in valuable mainstream viewers, we are likely to continue to see whitewashed images of middle-class gays and lesbians. If televisual representations of queers continue to be as limited as they are in 2010, and if indeed white, middle-class gay men have greatest access to the personal and community identifications produced and performed in relation to these texts, we are likely to see continued investment in existing "value" hierarchies that already structure queer identities and communities. By placing *QAF* and the commodification of gay and lesbian identities into a larger societal context, it is possible to see how changing public opinions, court challenges, the continuation of neoliberal economic frameworks, the increasing privatization of gayborhoods, in combination with the "discovery" of gay markets and mainstream viewers' "edgy" tastes, have led to increasing acceptance, privatization, and representation for white, middle-class gays and lesbians especially. In all of these instances—social, legal, economic, or representational—the "acceptable" and "valuable" queer tends to be, or is imagined to be, White, middle- to upper-class, gay or lesbian. While growing visibility is widely accepted as a "positive" development, it is also important to recognize how the marketing and privileging of selective non-normative sexualities has benefits as well as costs and erasures.

Notes

- [1] *QAF* utilizes the conventions of a community-based realist drama organized around a clique of friends who are shown in a wide variety of locations. In Canada, the one-hour series aired at 10:00 pm with an audio and textual warning that the series contains nudity, sexuality, coarse language, and that "viewer discretion is advised."
- [2] Many have argued that queer politicization crystallized with drag queens and transgender citizens leading the fight alongside gays, lesbians, and bisexuals at the Stonewall Inn in 1969. Gays and lesbians, however, have been the primary beneficiaries of this movement in the realm of television and, arguably, all aspects of American and Canadian societies.
- [3] Viacom owned Showtime while *QAF* was on the air. Showtime became a subsidiary of the CBS Corporation in 2005. In 2010 Viacom owns BET, MTV, LOGO, and Paramount, while CBS Corporation owns Showtime and Simon & Shuster (to name only the holdings relevant to this research).
- [4] By desiring and engaging in same-sex intimate relationships, the characters on the series violate normative gender expectations that all people will be "naturally" heterosexual. Apart from this significant gender transgression, the central gay male characters are overwhelmingly masculine, with the exception of Emmett, and the lesbian characters are maternal and feminine. The characters' transgressions against heteronormativity are otherwise couched in "proper" gender codes.
- [5] For more on the privatization of gayborhoods, see Walcott (2004) and Valverde and Cirak (2003).
- [6] Miller describes "Media Studies 1.0" as constructing audiences as "passive consumers" (p. 5). "Media Studies 2.0"—in his estimation—neglects the production and regulation of media, while conferring too much agency onto viewers.

- [7] According to Davis (2007) “there were some signs that some sectors of the [British] television audience might accept alternative depictions of gay and lesbian characters: more rounded characters who weren’t entirely sanitised or always morally correct” (p. 10). He cites Channel 4’s *Tales of the City* from 1993 as a breakthrough because “[a]lthough queer sex mostly occurred off-screen, at least it was evidently happening . . .” (p. 10). Further, Davis points to the BBC’s *This Life* (1996–1997) where “the only gay housemate in a gang of five, talked openly about his sexuality and had a great deal of (graphically depicted) sex” (p. 10). Although *QAF* (U.K.) had a predecessor in depicting sex between men on British television, the series was “often referred to by critics and academics as ‘groundbreaking,’ even ‘revolutionary’ . . . [and] ‘a milestone in the battle for sexual equality’” (Davis, 2007, pp. 1–2).
- [8] Beck’s beer, which sponsored the first two episodes, withdrew their sponsorship (Davis, 2007, p. 19). Meanwhile “the Independent Television Commission, which monitors British broadcasting, received 163 complaints . . . [and i]n the ITV’s history, only Channel 4’s screening of Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* caused more controversy” (Davis, 2007, p. 19).
- [9] According to Davis (2007): “*Queer as Folk* drew around 2.5 million viewers for its first episode, with a further 1.3 million watching the Saturday night repeat. Added together, this makes for a 17 percent audience share—significantly larger than Channel 4’s usual average of about 10 percent . . . Throughout the first series, ratings held fairly steady at around 2.3 million for the Tuesday broadcast, and 1 million for the weekend repeat” (p. 18).
- [10] The show was to be shot in Toronto and set in Pittsburgh.
- [11] I place “minorities” in quotation marks to signal that some groups designated as “minorities,” such as women, actually constitute majorities.
- [12] Fejes also suggests that the discrepancy between the higher income profiles of men over women results in greater representation of gay men rather than lesbians in popular culture.
- [13] Billingham (2005) writes that according to “audience research” the “largest single demographic viewing group [for *QAF* U.K.] was made up of young women between the ages of eighteen and thirty” (p. 122). Drawing on Billingham, Davis (2009) further identifies the “appeal of *Queer as Folk* beyond a gay niche market—indeed, the main audiences were gay men and young heterosexual women” (p. 12).
- [14] The “border” crossed in relation to *QAF* seems to be the representation of sexually active gays and lesbians on otherwise “straight TV.” I argue that on *QAF* the “boundaries” separating straight from gay remain primarily intact because queer sexualities that confound identity categories are rarely depicted on the series.
- [15] Facilitated by deregulation, today’s unprecedented concentration of media ownership by four conglomerates—Disney, News Corporation, Time Warner, and Viacom—with their greatly enhanced access to production, distribution, advertising, publicity, syndication, and globalized distribution, allows these corporations synergy. According to Casey *et al.* (2002), synergy describes the way conglomerates use multiple holdings to create, distribute, and advertise, which means that “a greater value is added to products than would have been the case had those parts remained separate” (pp. 236–237). Courtesy of neoliberal inspired television deregulation, Viacom came to own many communications assets (see Holt, 2003) and used an impressive number of these communication related companies in the creation, distribution, marketing, and franchising of *QAF*.
- [16] Viacom owned Blockbuster Inc. from 1994 to 2004.
- [17] In 2005, Viacom launched LOGO, an LGBT channel which is still airing *QAF* weekly in syndication in 2010. The conglomerate also currently owns two popular websites, afterellen.com and afterelton.com, that review and comment on the representations of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans people in popular culture. Through these two websites, Viacom promotes *QAF*, *The L Word*, LOGO, and its newer gay, lesbian, and queer projects in an online context that appears editorial, rather than promotional.

- [18] As considerable attention has been given to analyzing the text of *QAF* (U.S.) (Beirne, 2006, 2008; Davis, 2007; Farr & Degroult, 2008; Gamson, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Jones, 2001), I utilize other authors' textual analyses to make claims about the content of the series. I give greater attention to the institutional context of production and audience reception because these areas have not yet been written about as extensively.
- [19] Participants' names have been changed and all consented to allow their words to be used in publications. While I did not specifically collect demographic information from participants, most disclosed age, class, race, sex, and sexuality in the course of answering questions. Their ages ranged from 18 to "near retirement." The vast majority were university students and professionals, and while most identified as white, seven identified as Asian-Canadian, black, Inuit, Middle-Eastern Canadian, and one as a "racial minority." Viewers were recruited using posters throughout downtown Toronto and an email circulated through queer listservs. Of the 40 participants of this study, 16 identified as heterosexual women, 7 as queer women, 2 as lesbians, 11 as gay men, 3 as heterosexual men (one of whom had sex with men), and one man did not identify. These 40 participants provided me with many hours and pages of feedback about *QAF*. My work offers a close reading of specific participant responses in order to point to patterns that may be reflective of larger phenomena. I make no pretence, however, that this work is statistically generalizable.
- [20] For example, participant Bill wrote: "Ben and Michael and their Sero-discordant relationship. Perfect! For the first time I could relate to two gay characters who are [H.I.V.] positive and negative and in a monogamous relationship. This storyline is parallel to my life with my partner. To see this modeled in the media gives me a sense of normalcy. Something that I can relate to at a deep emotional level" (Survey). Bill's comments offer a sense of how *QAF* offered pleasurable identifications, acceptance, and personal validation to some of the gay men who watched the series.
- [21] Another less common reason was that these Canadian gay, lesbian, and queer viewers had already watched and enjoyed the British series when it ran on Showcase.
- [22] Overwhelmingly queer and lesbian women viewers "disidentified with the lesbian characters and strongly critiqued these images" (Peters, 2009, p. 19). Only one queer woman, Erin, enjoyed the lesbian characters, although she was also critical of the representation.
- [23] One white, middle-class, urban, undergraduate student, Erin, also described forging a personal queer identity partially in relation to *QAF*. Her experience suggests that one need not be directly hailed by the series in order to "come out" in relation to it. She explained: "When I first started watching I was straight, I mean I wasn't, but everyone thought I was because that's how I was telling everyone I was. So I made a new gay boyfriend in residence and we would go together to someone's house off-campus to watch. I was secretly watching the lesbians and I'm like getting all excited. I was totally watching for that 30 seconds in an hour of the women, like, holding hands. And my coming-out process was kind of through that first season" (Focus group). As with Lucas and Leo, *QAF* was part of the resources and discourses about queerness available to Erin. Although, as she points out, she may have had to look harder and wait longer to see the lesbian images that she was "totally watching for."
- [24] This is 4 out of a total of 11 gay identified male participants. Two queer identified women in the study said that they each went to Woody's to watch *QAF* once, enjoyed the experience, but never returned.
- [25] As Walcott (2004) has noted: "The transformation of gay ghettos into business districts signals the death of queer spaces as zones of socialization. In particular, the remaking of these spaces as zones of consumption means that queers now self-select on the basis of spending habits, and thus limits are placed on what kinds of politics, styles and tastes might bump into each other" (p. 36).
- [26] I have selected the figures from 2004 in order to highlight the "buying power" claims made by Viacom while *QAF* was on the air. As already stated, LOGOonline's most recent "gay

market overview” for advertisers puts this figure at “\$835.3 billion in buying power by 2011” (LOGOonline, 2010). Returning briefly to a point made earlier in this article, while there is scholarly agreement that lesbians are not regarded as “an attractive, identifiable niche market” and that lesbians can “moreover be reached through ads aimed at women generally” (Fejes, 2002, p. 201), the market research cited by LOGO continues to group gays and lesbians together.

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