

Sarah Rüß

“We Want the Right Kind of Gay” – Homonormative Representation of Lesbian Characters on Television

Abstract: In recent years, television series increasingly include representations of lesbians. This supposedly positive development, which enhances the public visibility of lesbians, however, is tethered to demands for assimilation into the heterosexual model, resulting in a homonormative lifestyle. Media representations, among other things, foster demands for a lifestyle centered around monogamy and reproduction, through establishing, supporting, and disseminating a normative framework on which social tolerance and acceptance rest. This framework provides a model for a desirable lifestyle that focuses on marriage, monogamy, and raising children. Television series focusing on lesbian characters enact this normative framework through narrative by utilizing the sense of shame to invalidate non-homonormative lifestyles. This article will engage with this current, taking as its case studies the US American television series *The Fosters* and *The L Word*.

Keywords: Shame, affect, homonormativity, normativity, *The L Word*, *The Fosters*, television, lesbian

“We want the right kind of gay,” states the producer of a talk show in the series *The L Word* during an off-stage conversation with Alice, one of the lesbian main characters of the series, and thus formulating a social presupposition at the same time. This implies a correct, i.e. normative form of gayness. Yet what is this assumed norm based on? In the Foucauldian sense, it is precisely the dispositive that constitutes an order of norming through jurisprudence, the theological apparatus of power, and intervening social processes of negotiation, which are positioned in between. The “right kind” of queerness thus becomes a requirement which is formulated from a position that is contingent on an inherently heteronormative discourse. More specifically, “the right kind of gay” implies that there is a “right” way of living in the “wrong”¹ way, and that this “right” life must be derived from (hetero-) normative principles of exclusion, as can be argued in terms of common theories of homonormativity.²

1 This dichotomy of good/bad; right/wrong in regard to a group consisting of a minority has been thoroughly discussed in Stuart Hall (ed.): *The Spectacle of the Other*. In: *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London 1997, 225–277.

2 For an elaboration of the concept of “homonormativity,” see Lisa Duggan: *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston, MA 2009; Michael Warner: *The*

It is precisely this tension between the logic of media representation, heteronormativity, and the “normalization” of homosexuality that this chapter addresses. Which discourses generate the normative, which apparatuses of normativity can be identified, and which regulative forces impact this process? Which norms are utilized in the process? Which representational logics do media representations of lesbian characters apply and renegotiate? How can the representation of a certain queer lifestyle lead to the shifting of hierarchies and the division of communities through the use of affects? In the following article, I will argue that affect economies based on normative structures regulate the media staging of lesbianism. This article focuses particularly on lesbian visibility, utilizing two TV series as case studies, namely *The L Word* (2004–2009) by Ilene Chaiken for Showtime and *The Fosters* (2013–2018) by Peter Paige and Bradley Bredeweg for ABC Family. I identify different modes of standardization of lesbian lifestyles, such as the promotion and advocacy for marriage and reproduction, in the narratives of the series *The L Word* and *The Fosters*. With a cumulative duration spanning from 2004 to 2018, the extensive runtime of both series facilitates a comprehensive analysis and comparative examination of the evolving dynamics and transformations that has occurred throughout the twenty-first century. In the following, I will elaborate upon the previous mentioned modes of enforcing a normative lifestyle through shame by means of some selected examples from both series.

1 Theoretical Preconception: Homonormativity and Queerness

Looking at the two series, two modes of operation for the depiction of lesbians become apparent. These are predominantly oriented towards heteronormative role models such as marriage, family life, and idyllic, suburban lifestyle.³ For instance, heteronormativity and/or homonormativity is expressed in both chosen series through the pursuit of a monogamous relationship with the goal of marriage and a shared desire to have children. The series *The Fosters*, for example, depicts the ideal of a family consisting of two parents, children, and a single-family house in the suburbs. The two women Stef and Lena live in the suburbs of San Diego, where they raise their five children (some of which are biological, some are adopted, and some are foster-children) together. Stef works as a police officer, while Lena is an assistant principal

Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life. Cambridge, MA 2000; Jonathan Katz / Lisa Duggan: *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York, NY 1995; David Paternotte and Manon Tremblay (eds.): *The Ashgate Research Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*. Farnham 2015; Noreen Giffney / Michael O'Rourke: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*. Farnham 2009.

³ For an elaboration of the assimilation into the family-oriented heteronormativity, see David L. Eng: *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham, N.C. 2010, 27.

at her children’s private school. Both move in a predominantly heterosexual environment in which they rarely see themselves as “different” or hardly question the hegemony of heterosexuality in the first seasons.

It is evident that the characters lead predominantly privileged lives, therefore departing from previous depictions of tragically suffering homosexual subjects. This change in the portrayal of living to a focus on a fulfilled (upper-)middle-class life, as is the case in *The Fosters*, is often showcased through the highly respected and well-paid professions of the protagonists such as professor, director of museums or schools, the police force, etc., and their living conditions characterized by the inhabitation of luxurious apartments, houses in the suburbs or wealthy neighborhoods of US metropolitan areas. The intention behind this change is to achieve acceptance through the staging of normality in the media. In contrast to *The Fosters*, the first episodes of *The L Word* were produced almost a decade earlier than the former and deal with concepts of *queer* life considerably more distant from the mainstream.⁴ For instance, the series addresses topics such as the pregnancy of a trans*man⁵ as well as concepts like the one of a chosen queer family. The aforementioned mode of operation becomes evident in *The L Word* through its particular focus on the interpersonal relationships of a group of friends of young, successful, predominantly lesbian women in Los Angeles.

Bette and Tina, a museum director (and later professor) and a film producer, are a couple living in a big house with a pool, trying to have a child together at the beginning of the series. Dana is a successful tennis player who tries to hide her homosexuality out of fear of losing her career and her advertising deals. Meanwhile, Shane lives in a house next door to them and is known for sleeping with (not committing to) a variety of women. She becomes a world-famous hairstylist as the series progresses. Similar to Shane, Alice also gains fame after she goes through a variety of jobs in the entertainment industry and eventually lands her own radio show – and later a talk show. Jenny, who lives with Shane, publishes a book, which then proceeds to become a bestseller and is subsequently made into a movie by Tina. The plot keeps revolving around the friends’ problems, which often have to do with jealousy, breakups, and love. Bette and Tina are staged as a dream couple who, throughout the series, always get back together, even after a multitude of separations. The social status of the women is clearly marked as successful, charismatic, and rich. At the same time, *The L*

4 As these series deal with other representations of queer life besides lesbians, I have chosen to use the term “queer” when referring to the mentioned series. I have highlighted my understanding of “queerness” on the following pages.

5 Even though the treatment of the character Max Sweeney has been criticized for “perpetuating harmful stereotypes about transmasculine people and transition.” (Quispe López: Max Is Back: The L Word’s Daniel Sea and Leo Sheng Discuss the Infamous Trans Character’s Return. *Them* (09 December 2022). <https://www.them.us/story/daniel-sea-leo-sheng-the-l-word-generation-q-interview-max-return> [last accessed 18 June 2023]).

Word challenges the heteronormative narrative of the few queer people in a heterosexual environment through its multitude of queer characters and their relationships of various kinds. There is still no other series that features so many lesbian women as main characters. On one hand, it becomes evident that there is an intentional presentation of particularly heteronormative lifestyles to achieve social acceptance; on the other hand, there is also an implementation of radical concepts of queer life. These concepts however, are ultimately always tied to normatives.

Taking a closer look at this tension between queer and homonormative television concepts in individual scenes, a pattern emerges that limits the repertoire of representations. In this context, it appears that the life goals the characters pursue hardly differ from one another. The previously mentioned norms of marriage with the desire to have children signal a successful, positive representation which, however, does not permit any alternatives. Such depiction in popular TV formats in relation to queer concepts of representation can certainly be described as homonormative. Established in the 1990s by US social- and cultural theorist Lisa Duggan, this term refers to the adaptation of queer people to heterosexual ideals with the goal of normalizing homosexual realities of life.⁶ Undoubtedly, the representation of lesbian identities in these television productions appear as deviating from heterosexual norms, by showcasing non-heterosexual lifestyles. However, taking queer concepts seriously and examining lesbian productions in the early 2000s critically leads one to the realization that representation consistently organizes itself in a homonormative manner. What emerges is that in lesbian series, queer role models, family structures, and identity politics are not thwarted, subverted, or even overcome. In fact, it seems that queer productions can hardly be reconciled with the portrayal of lesbian women.

Queer not only serves as a collective term that unites everything that is not cis-, i.e. heterosexual; it embodies changeability and ambivalence, which associates it with “an identity category, political positionality, methodological framework, or system of knowledge production.”⁷ One of the founders of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick describes the power of the term: “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*.”⁸ The concept is understood to be in a constant state of evolution and change, reflecting its fluidity in its conceptualization and, at the same time, allowing for a broader approach and applicability of the notion.

Furthermore, especially considering the history of the term *queer*, it is important to note that it had long been used as a derogatory term and was reclaimed both academically and socially in the 1990s. According to queer theorist Annamarie Jagose, the term *queer* can be seen as part of a broader cultural and political shift toward a fluid

⁶ Lisa Duggan: The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism. In: *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. by Russ Castronovo et al. New York, NY 2002, 175–177.

⁷ Noreen Giffney: *Queering the Non/human*. Aldershot 2008, 4.

⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Tendencies*. New York, NY 1993, XII.

and diverse understanding of sexuality and gender.⁹ However, it is important to recognize that queerness as a category is still considered to be predominantly occupied by whiteness and lesbian/gay identity. US trans rights activists and social theorists Dave Spade and Morgan Bassichis demonstrate this by drawing parallels between homonormativity and racism. They describe this as follows: “White gay and lesbian politics must remain silent on anti-black racism, must position itself as anything but black, to keep its place in line for the future.”¹⁰ They illustrate that achieving equal rights requires assimilation, which tends to abandon marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ movement. Their article is not only a rallying cry for the relevance of intersectionality, it also highlights the requirements for tolerance and acceptance of non-normative subjects in society, specifically that the success of queer progress is inevitably tied to processes of hierarchization and demarcation.¹¹

One of the main theoretical concepts applicable for a queer analysis of heteronormativity at the intersection of social reality and media representations is Foucault’s theorization of normative discourses of order and power.¹² In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault still identifies homosexuality as a sexual practice and highlights that the practice of homosexuality leads to the formation of an identity through institutions, i.e. through the interaction with clergy, doctors, elected officials, etc., and in this way the “artificial unity” of a homosexual identity was only created by its orientation towards “public authority” with the subject of “sexuality.”¹³ According to Foucault, these are the norms that exclude homosexuals and incriminate and pathologize them in the first place.¹⁴ This allows the locking up of or shunning away from those identified as homosexuals according to the law. Hence, homosexuals always operate outside of the norm from which they are excluded. The norm that is enforced through exclusion is certainly to be understood here, drawing upon Foucault and Butler, as the heteronormative order. However, a lot has changed since then, such as the increased visibility of people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the landmark decision of the US Supreme Court in *Lawrence vs. Texas* in 2003,¹⁵ essentially decriminalizing homosexuality nationwide.

Through the classification of sexualities in the late nineteenth century, namely that “[t]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a

9 Jagose: *Queer Theory: An Introduction*.

10 Morgan Bassichis / Dean Spade: Queer Politics and Anti-Blackness. In: *Queer Necropolitics*, ed. by Jinhana Haritaworn et al. London 2014, 196.

11 For an elaborate discussion, see Roderick Ferguson: *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minnesota, MN 2003.

12 Michel Foucault: *The History of Sexuality. 1: An Introduction*, trans by. Robert Hurley. New York 1990, 144.

13 Foucault: *The History of Sexuality. 1: An Introduction*, 152.

14 Foucault: *The History of Sexuality. 1: An Introduction*, 144.

15 *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

species,”¹⁶ Foucault defines the constructivist framework of discourse, since the classification into sexualities enables the formation of a deviant identity in the first place.¹⁷ Thus, it can be stated with and against Foucault that, on the one hand, there are social norms of exclusion against the homosexual, but on the other hand, in the last twenty years, the media visibility of lesbian “homosexuals” has developed its own, independent norms in contrast to heteronormative structures.

Eve Sedgwick had already criticized the existence of the identity-based categorization of heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality, as described by Michel Foucault.¹⁸ She argues that binary dualisms are characterized by a power imbalance. As a result, the identities are in an imbalance, which brings an instability and thus a constant change, because “the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A.”¹⁹ Sedgwick outlines deconstruction as an important tool to break down and intersect these categories so that new, more fluid identities and possible enactments of sexuality emerge. She argues the process of queering, i.e. “to queer something,” as examining a work through a queer lens in order to discern the underlying subtexts of identity, desire, and longing that challenge the normative.²⁰ US queer theorist Jack Halberstam considers the power of queering to be attacking, destabilizing, and rejecting normative structures. In his book *Queer Art of Failure* he engages with the rejection of the norm through failure.²¹ He further describes this as transformative and productive in enabling and preserving alternative realities of life.²² As noted by Sedgwick and Halberstam, destabilization can occur through media visibility, as film and television reveal alternative forms of identification and belonging that counteract the exclusionary consequences of heteronormativity.²³

These representations are certainly tied to patterns of reception and viewing habits, as well as to neoliberal conditions of production.²⁴ The staging of queer life concepts is always oriented towards heterosexual values and ideals and explicitly marks deviations as negative. That precisely such theoretical considerations played no or

16 Foucault: *The History of Sexuality. 1: An Introduction*, 43.

17 Annemarie Jagose: *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York 1996, 23–27.

18 Foucault: *The History of Sexuality. 1: An Introduction*, 43.

19 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA 2008, 10.

20 Sedgwick: *Tendencies*, 4.

21 Jack Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*. London 2011.

22 Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

23 See also Deborah A. Fisher et al.: Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Content on Television: A Quantitative Analysis across Two Seasons. *Journal of Homosexuality* 52/3 (2007), doi:10.1300/J082v52n03_08; Kate McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television – New Queer Visibility & The Lesbian Normal*. Bristol 2020, 8.

24 Of course, this is also related to the airing sites which additionally control the content. *The Fosters* ran on primetime Fox, while *The L Word* was primarily available on DVD or aired on the much smaller Showtime channel.

only a marginal role in the production of the series *The L Word* and *The Fosters* will be demonstrated in the following. In particular, linking queer-theoretical models of analysis will substantiate the thesis that lesbian visibility on TV in the 2010s was rather closely tied to normatives, i.e. to a “right kind of gay.” Subsequently, this chapter will focus on queer theory in combination with affect theory, in particular with regard to the affect of shame. I will elaborate on the connection between reception models and the balance of affects, as well as the influence on normative structures. Additionally, I will examine the interplay of shame and the goal of obtaining acceptance through reproducing normative social patterns. The goal of this investigation is to find out where and how affect ecologies lead to a perpetuation or reproduction of norms in media contexts and how they negotiate a new representation of lesbians and simultaneously regulate its reception.²⁵

2 New Queer Visibility

As a concept rooted in the intentional assimilation to the prevailing system characterized by unequal power dynamics, homonormativity can be regarded as being diametrically opposed to the subversive practice of rejecting identity categories. It aims to regulate and contain the non-normative force through deliberate preferences for specific lifestyles.²⁶ The German queer theorists Sabine Hark and Mike Laufenberg describe this alleged obtaining of acceptance as an “[i]nvitation of secondary order, [. . .] which leaves the ‘heterosexual dominance’ untouched.”²⁷ Arguing for a queer feminist perspective that allows for “[s]exuality, not only to be understood as a field of regulation and normalization, but at the same time as a field in which structural relations meet the practices of subjects and thus become negotiable and transformable.”²⁸ The focus on the effects of neoliberalism, which Lisa Duggan highlights in her analysis of homonormativity, implies a connection between sexual orientation and a

25 Thomas Peele: *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*. New York, NY 2011; Fisher et al.: *Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Content on Television*; McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television*.

26 This shift in normativity and the resulting division of the LGBTQ+ community was already discussed and critically examined in 2000 in Warner: *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, 47.

27 “Einladung zweiter Klasse, [. . .] die die ‘heterosexuelle Dominanz’ unangetastet lässt.” Mike Laufenberg: *Sexualität in der Krise. Heteronormativität im Neoliberalismus*. In: *Gesellschaft. Feministische Krisendiagnosen*, ed. by Erna Appelt / Brigitte Aulenbacher / Angelika Wetterer. 37 (2013), 227–245, 229. [Own translation, S.R.].

28 “Sexualität nicht lediglich als Feld der Regulierung und Normierung begriffen wird, sondern zugleich als Bereich, in dem strukturelle Verhältnisse auf die Praktiken von Subjekten treffen und so verhandel- und transformierbar werden.” Laufenberg: *Sexualität in der Krise*, 229. [Own translation, S.R.].

neo-liberal worldview and the ideals attached to it. It is evident that homonormative lifestyles, Duggan argued when she introduced the concept of “homonormativity” in 2003, proclaim a deviation from (hetero-)normative lifestyles, but that normativity itself is at the same time linked to the heterosexual matrix. The expectation appears to be that promiscuity and non-monogamy should be avoided in exchange for acceptance of seemingly non-conforming realities of life. By surrendering to ideals derived from heteronormative ways of living and to normative socio-political concepts, i.e. adapting to the ideal of a stable monogamous relationship and valuing the concept of the family, the marginalized individual can achieve tolerance and recognition.²⁹ Undeniably, the required staging of (homo)normativity in regards to economic success applies to the representation of marginalized groups such as lesbians. The objective of gaining advantages for the marketing and economic profitability of the respective series leads to the consequence that certain marginalized groups are excluded from the mainstream ideal, which, in turn, is influenced by audiovisual productions. Representations of idealized lifestyles in media productions not only reproduce the common idea of cohabitation, they also organize feelings and affects that can range from the pleasant to the shameful. A lesbian mode of representation also depends on discursive acts along social norms and operates through ecologies of affect that influence spectators not identifying as queer.

Especially since the new millennium, the visibility of queer individuals in different media products increased noticeably.³⁰ This development is referred to as “new queer visibility” by British media and queer scholar Kate McNicholas Smith.³¹ She describes this process as follows: “[N]ew queer visibility emerges through complex politics that encompass (homo)national discourses of democracy and progress, heterosexist and racialized media cultures, and queer and feminist challenges to sexual norms and hierarchies.”³² In her dissertation, she addresses the “lesbian normal” and describes the adaptation of lesbian life to heterosexual ideals.³³ McNicholas also situates the problem of the concept of “new queer visibility” as restricting “for queer women of colour, butch, older, disabled, gender non-conforming or non-binary subjects.”³⁴ This means that representation does not include all lesbian women and a renewed exclusion from representation occurs. Media logics of representation are, as established earlier, shaped by normative desires and, especially in the mainstream, guided by neo-liberal ideals strictly focused on economic success.

²⁹ Duggan: *The Twilight of Equality?*

³⁰ GLAAD: *Where We Are on TV 2010 – 2011*. https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/wherewear_eontv2010-2011.pdf, 7 (last accessed 09 September 2021).

³¹ McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television*, 2.

³² McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television*, 4.

³³ McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television*.

³⁴ McNicholas Smith: *Lesbians on Television*, 8.

Canadian media scholar Lisa Henderson describes the phenomenon of representations of homonormativity in the media, as follows: "comportment, family, and modes of acquisition are the class markers of queer worth, pulling characters and scenarios toward a normative middle, but not without deploying an array of other class meanings and values."³⁵ This illustrates the relevance of the representation of a "correct" and "good" queer identity, as this is inevitably linked to progress towards a perceived "equality," although limited to a certain group that adheres to these established markers of progress. At the same time, this kind of representation creates a new norm that is strengthened and externalized with the help of the affect of shame. One of the pioneers of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, together with Adam Frank, explored this connection of shame and the theory of affect based on the work of psychologist and philosopher Silvan Tomkins.³⁶ They describe their approach to affect theory as a tool to gain a new access to queer theoretical research on issues of sexuality, sex, and desire by expanding it to include emotions and affects.³⁷ According to Sedgwick and Frank, the connection between sexuality and shame is not innate but rather socially created.³⁸ This affect of shame becomes a part of queer identity through external influences such as discrimination, resulting in an (unconscious) assimilation into the heterosexual norm and thus an assimilation into mainstream society. To sum up, heteronormative media representations support the emergence of a "right kind of gay." This will become evident in the following discussion on the step from the first lesbian representation on TV to a homonormative production structure of series narratives loaded with shame. By creating shame through the devaluation of alternative concepts and by devoting attention to heteronormative models, shame acts as a regulative for the discourse on "the right kind of gay."

3 Shame as a Regulative Tool

The L Word has now acquired a cult-like status and is still one of the few series with a predominantly female* queer cast. One of the most important recurring themes in this series, which features many different lesbian characters, is marriage and the creation of a family which is simultaneously linked to the shameful portrayal of a deviant lifestyle. This applies to the majority of all main characters, as they consider marriage the ultimate goal in their lives. One example is the planning of the wedding

³⁵ Lisa Henderson: *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*. New York, NY 2013, 34. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814790571.003.0003>.

³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC 2003; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham, NC 1995.

³⁷ Sedgwick: *Shame and Its Sisters*.

³⁸ Sedgwick: *Shame and Its Sisters*, 4–7.

of Shane and her girlfriend Carmen. Shane has had “problems” with monogamous relationships since the beginning of the series, often having multiple sex partners simultaneously or cheating on her steady girlfriends. *The L Word* focuses on many different one-night stands and problems that arise as soon as she enters a monogamous relationship. After Shane cheated on Carmen at the beginning of their relationship, Carmen reads Shane the definition of monogamy from a dictionary:

C: Monogamy is common among birds. It is the practice of having a single mate during a period of time. Does that mean anything to you?

S: I am willing to try. Is that not enough? I am willing to try something that doesn't come naturally to me, that I don't understand but am willing to try!

C: Birds, Shane. I am talking about a goddamn fucking bird. Asking you to be as civilized as a goddamn fucking bird.³⁹

Carmen states that anything aside from monogamy is uncivilized and Shane's problems with monogamy are based on a lack of morals and loyalty, without confronting or unraveling as to why it might be difficult for Shane to live in a monogamous relationship. She does not even consider a non-monogamous lifestyle as an option and Shane remains in the role of the unhappy cheater who keeps hurting people around her, ultimately leaving Carmen at the altar during their wedding ceremony.

The Fosters, similarly, focuses on marriage and considers the right for same-sex marriage as a given. There are a total of three marriage proposals and two weddings between Stef and Lena across five seasons. The second marriage in *The Fosters* also focuses on legal recognition and the associated achievement of normality and the acceptance that is in turn linked to it. Stef explicitly describes this thus:

S: I like our marriage being recognized by the federal government. I know we don't need anybody's permission to love one another, but you know what, it feels good to have the same rights as every straight couple. To be included. To be protected under the law. God knows that right might be taken away from us, but, man, as long as we have it, I want it. You know I want to be equal. I want our love and family to be out and proud and if they try to take marriage away from us, then you're damn right I'm going to fight to keep it. Because you know, us getting married again, that piece of paper, that's about more than just us.⁴⁰

This example demonstrates that the queer characters are aware that they have to adapt to the heteronormative ideal if they want to achieve equality and that this can only happen with the permission of dominant heterosexual society. They are also aware that this right can be taken away from them at any time. The desire for “normality” is oriented towards socially established ideals, such as same-sex marriage in this case, whereby the existing system is accepted and not questioned. The concern

³⁹ *The L Word: Lifesize*. 2006. Season 03, episode 06. TC: 00:21:45.

⁴⁰ *The Fosters: The Letter*. 2017. Season 04, episode 16. TC: 00:37:33.

that this right, which emulates a lifestyle model exemplified by heterosexuals under the guise of “equal” and signals belonging, could be taken without a right of co-determination unites the individuals seeking recognition. The fear that the dissolution of the marriage would put one’s family members at a disadvantage, that they would no longer be “out and proud,” thus becomes a struggle for the entire family, who would suffer from exclusion. In this process, the heterosexual members are equated with the queer individuals in their environment and put at a disadvantage. By creating shame, the identity of queer persons is to be classified as a flaw in this heterosexual system, thus becoming disruptive bodies that simultaneously also disadvantage heterosexual individuals.⁴¹

British-Australian queer theorist Sara Ahmed provides examples for the regulation of homosexual bodies by heterosexual ones. This is expressed, among other things, in that queer persons “may also be ‘asked’ not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by avoiding the display of queer intimacy.”⁴² Ahmed argues that “[m]aintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies ‘go along with it,’ to agree to where you are placed.”⁴³ This “public comfort” ensures a hegemonic heterosexuality, as the existence of any variations and their visibility is immediately effectively suppressed and marginalized.

The signaling of deviation as something shameful, which society stigmatizes and does not allow to exist, enables a justified exclusion, since acceptance and tolerance is possible within the previously set norms and thus a non-classification is linked to an intended exclusion of one’s own person. Thus, an assignment of guilt automatically arises. Those who cannot adapt are themselves to blame for the lack of recognition in society. Tolerance and acceptance thereby become a generous gesture that allows queer people to belong and justify rejection if the standards are not met.

In the series *The Fosters*, the protagonists constantly operate in a predominantly heterosexual environment, Jenna, Stef and Lena’s only lesbian friend, particularly sticks out. After her “failed marriage,” she is portrayed as a pitiful single woman who unsuccessfully makes advances in Stef and Lena’s circle of mostly straight friends. Stef and Lena express their dislike of Jenna’s behavior and actively distance themselves from her. When Jenna flirts with another woman – Steph and Lena’s neighbor Tess – in front of her husband, both even confront her and explicitly refer to marriage as an institution, towards which she has to behave respectfully.⁴⁴ Jenna is sent home and, after Tess agrees to a meeting, is monitored by Lena, who only agrees to the meeting under this pretext.⁴⁵

41 David M. Halperin: *How to Be Gay*. Cambridge, MA 2012.

42 Sara Ahmed: *Cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh 2004, 148.

43 Sara Ahmed: Happy Objects. In: *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg / Gregory J. Seigworth. New York, NY 2010, 39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822393047-003>.

44 *The Fosters*. #IWasmadeInAmerica. Season 05, episode 12.

45 *The Fosters*: *Line in the Sand*. 2018. Season 05, episode 13. (TC: 00:13:30).

Another aspect showcasing the limited visibility enabled by homonormativity is the reappraisal of the demand for the representation of lesbian individuals. Both series do not consider any butch characters. For instance, shame factors are utilized to mark Shane's departure from the presumed societal expectation of femininity. Dana, a closeted, professional tennis player, actively confronts her by stating that she looks too gay.⁴⁶ As butches endanger the male-female dichotomy, the existence of a woman presenting herself in a masculine way blurs the boundaries of the gender order and creates an in-between. Butches not only reveal the existence of gender norms by violating them, they also create a new space for identity outside the mainstream.⁴⁷ Halberstam discusses the butch under the rubric of "female masculinity" and describes this subject position as a way to question the binary system and dissolve the norm of femininity. He writes:

Female masculinity within queer sexual discourse allows for the disruption of even flows between gender and anatomy, sexuality and identity, sexual practice and performativity. It reveals a variety of queer genders, such as stone butchness, that challenge once and for all the stability and accuracy of binary sex-gender systems.⁴⁸

As a result, hardly any butch characters are shown and the feminine characters clearly distance themselves from these women so as not to endanger the norm. This also comes to the fore in *The L Word*. In the beginning, only Shane takes the position of a soft butch; however, she too is read as more androgynous and never refers to herself as butch. Due to the lack of confirmation of Shane's "butchness" as part of her identity, viewers are left to speculate. In the series itself, it long remains a taboo. When the series introduces the trans*man Max, who initially refers to himself as butch, the group reacts with incomprehension and rejection.⁴⁹ The friends emphasize that this term is outdated and uncool and therefore no longer fits into the lifestyle of the hip lesbian woman living in Los Angeles.⁵⁰ The series explicitly bans "butch" as a possible subject position by explicitly rejecting the term. Halberstam elucidates this as follows: "[w]hat *The L Word* must repudiate in order to represent *lesbian as successful* is the butch."⁵¹

Likewise in *The Fosters*, the term "butch" is used as something negative and insulting. In season three, Stef is diagnosed with breast cancer, which is why she decides to have a mastectomy. During this decision-making process, she discusses her fears and concerns about her love life, her physical well-being, as well as the recep-

⁴⁶ *The L Word: Pilot*. 2004. Season 01, episode 01. (TC: 00:13:50).

⁴⁷ Butches were often excluded from lesbian feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. See Jack Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*. New York, NY 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002703>.

⁴⁸ Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*, 139.

⁴⁹ *The L Word: Lobsters*. 2006. Season 03, episode 03.

⁵⁰ McNichols Smith: *Lesbians on Television*, 53.

⁵¹ Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

tion of her changed appearance in the social environment with her wife, Lena. "A cop with a flat chest. I can hear the comments now. People already think I'm butch."⁵² Based on this example, the negative social perceptions become apparent and are mirrored to the viewers. *The Fosters* picks up on this comment again in the same episode, after Stef has decided to get breast implants and cut her hair short. She reflects on her internalized homophobia and expresses her concern that without breasts, she will no longer be read as a woman. "Breasts and long hair do not make me a woman. And what the hell do I care if people think that I'm butch because they have an idea of what a woman is supposed to look like."⁵³ While the perception of one's own homophobia through social structures is evident, labels like "butch" and "dyke" are not invalidated as negative. Halberstam describes the problem the butch poses for gender order and exclusion in *The L Word* as "the butch [. . .] gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity, as an earlier, melancholic model of queerness that has now been updated and transformed into desirable womanhood, desirable, that is, in a hetero-visual model."⁵⁴

Even though Stef frees herself from the offensive views of her environment by declaring that she will not be influenced by the opinions of others, she explicitly distances herself from this description. The attribution "butch" thus remains something negative and Stef continues to dwell in heteronormative structures or does not overcome them. Additionally, it becomes clear that Stef has a clear idea of what a butch should look like and that she does not want to be associated with it. Here, the affect of shame once again comes into play. Naming a subject that one does not want to resemble because it is socially disadvantaged reveals the form or default for tolerance that Sara Ahmed speaks of.⁵⁵

The heteronormative structures and family models are thus not only linked to monogamous marriage, hardly any alternative life models are shown. Ahmed also picks up on this and refers to the social classification of the (cis-heterosexual) family as a "happy object" and ascribes the degradation to a "cause of unhappiness"⁵⁶ of all those who are not involved in procreation. "Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of 'getting along.'"⁵⁷ By fulfilling previously socially established ideas, the possibility of a happy life is promised. Any deviation from these is taken as a clear sign of an unhappy life.⁵⁸ Therefore, the main

52 *The Fosters: Rehearsal*. 2016. Season 03, episode 18, TC: 00:03:35.

53 *The Fosters: Rehearsal*. TC: 00:35:10.

54 Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

55 Ahmed: *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 146.

56 Ahmed: *Happy Objects*, 30.

57 Ahmed: *Cultural politics of Emotion*, 39.

58 For further elaboration, see Laurens Berlant: *Cruel Optimism*. Durham 2011, whose important contribution to affect theory Kathleen Stewarts describes as a "a brilliant discussion of how objects and

task for Stef and Lena is to fulfill their role as mothers. This portrayal of a homonormative lifestyle is strategically designed to engage queer viewers and depict an idealized vision that demonstrates the potential for attaining a “normal” life. At the same time, stereotypes are reproduced by staging two women as caring mothers with little engagement outside of family structures. It is important to mention that both women classify their families as the center of their lives and do not express any needs outside of family life and the role of the mother.⁵⁹ In other words, Stef and Lena not only lead a homonormative life, they also present as desirable a homosexual life in a predominantly heterosexual society. In this way, they do not rebel against an unfair system but rather fit into it, or reclassify the “unhappy object” as a “happy object.” The acceptance of these structures is consolidated by the affect of shame, which arises when one cannot fulfill the established norm and, as a consequence, experiences exclusion and discrimination. Sara Ahmed describes this as not fitting into a mold, as creating “discomfort,” which results in the rejection of one’s identity.⁶⁰

4 Working Through Shame

Interestingly, the respective last season of both series take up the topic of shame and reconsider the reappraisal of the societal influence on the queer individual. In *The Fosters*, Stef begins therapy to deal with her father’s rejection of her because of her sexuality, which has led to panic and anxiety attacks that negatively affect her relationship with her partner. Her therapist uses a similar definition to Eve Sedgwick’s and defines Stef’s shame as “unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being something wrong. And this assault on the self, it can cause deep depression and severe anxiety.”⁶¹ Her father is explicitly marked as the trigger of shame and the influence of the heterosexual norm is identified. Given the lack of explicit engagement with homophobia and its resultant discrimination in previous discourse, this examination holds particular relevance. Additionally, in episode 18 of the fifth and final season, Stef confronts her deceased father and describes the desire to conform to the norm that had influenced her life for a long time. She explains that the search for her father’s recognition has influenced her decisions at various stages of her life, such as her choice of career, marriage to a man, and so on. Her desire for normality is closely linked to the rejection she had previously experi-

scenes of desire matter not just because of their content but because they hold promise.” (Kathleen Stewart: *Ordinary Affects*. New York, NY 2007, 1).

59 *The Fosters*: *Just say yes*. 2018. Season 05, episode 18. TC: 00:20:21.

60 Ahmed: *Cultural politics of Emotion*, 148.

61 *The Fosters*: *Mother’s Day*. 2018. Season 05, episode 15. TC: 00:02:29.

enced from her father.⁶² The affect of shame is thus additionally used in *The Fosters* to support the homonormative lifestyle. Stef's shame as a result of her father's intolerance is a problem for the relationship of the two women, thus the affect of shame is used to visualize a threat to homonormativity due to a lack of acceptance. This shame, which was and is triggered by the environment, endangers Stef and Lena's homonormative marriage, as it affects their mental health but also the expression of their own identity. Stef mentions her fear that her right to a relationship or to love could be taken away because of a deviation from the "normal."⁶³ This fear primarily refers to the legally defined norm and thus to the construct of marriage, which Lisa Duggan as well as Michael Warner defined as one of the main symbols of homonormativity. At the same time, Stef links her possibility to love to the recognition of an institution, here the state, as if it could not exist without legal consent. She explains,

this shame that I carry around in me, that keeps me from being completely vulnerable with you, that sometimes, when we make love, makes me feel like what we're doing is not right, like I am not right. I love you and I am so proud of our family and yet I carry around this fear that it could be taken away from us, our right to love each other, because we're not normal.⁶⁴

The Fosters thus exist exclusively within a homonormative framework with the goal of normality. Love outside of neoliberal values does not seem to exist for them. In addition, "normal" is never defined in the series and thus not questioned but tacitly refers to social majorities. The examination fails to address the fact that normativity is a construct primarily achieved through adaptation, as demonstrated by the desire to conform to societal expectations. Furthermore, by portraying the father as a source of shame and a symbol of a homophobic environment, the responsibility is assigned solely to overtly homophobic individuals and incidents, which many individuals may not identify with. However, it overlooks the presence of microaggressions and subliminal discriminations, such as inquiries about a spouse of the opposite sex or describing their relationship as alternative or intriguing, which initially remain unnoticed. Thereby, a reflection on heterosexual hegemony, on one's own actions, but also the questioning of the discriminating system of norms remains missing. Unlike in *The Fosters*, the many lesbian characters in *The L Word* form their own norm and move predominantly in lesbian and queer circles. Therefore, the shame factor is hardly addressed since it seemingly does not exist in the group constellation (with a few exceptions, e.g. gender expression of Shane and Max). Only when individual participants break away from the group are they subjected to discrimination. For example, Bette and Tina, when trying to adopt a second child, are first asked by the parents of the biological mother about their husbands and, when they identify themselves as lesbians, are asked to leave.⁶⁵ Or Dana

⁶² The Fosters: *Just say yes*. TC: 00:29:30.

⁶³ The Fosters: *Just say yes*. 2018. TC: 00:33:19.

⁶⁴ The Fosters: *Just say yes*. 2018. TC: 00:33:19.

⁶⁵ The L Word: *Leaving Los Angeles*. 2009. Season 06, episode 04.

is rejected by her parents after coming out.⁶⁶ Through the character of Alice, *The L Word* draws attention to these problematic reactions and the behavior of the heterosexual environment. After she outed a basketball player who had previously made homophobic comments, she is offered a job on a talk show called “The Look.” There, however, she encounters resistance due to her addressing of lesbian issues and her rather progressive views.

Alice: Are you saying you don't want me to be out? [. . .]

Producer: No, we definitely want gay. No! Gay is good. It brings ratings in daytime.

Host 1: But you know, we just want the right kind of gay.

Producer 1: Like fun gay not angry gay. Gay gossip, gay lifestyle. You know: Fun.⁶⁷

The desire for a “right” kind of homosexuality illustrates the attempt to force queer persons into a normative model. In the process, Alice is threatened with the loss of her job if she does not comply with her employer's idea of the “fun gay” person.

Additionally, the neo-liberal economic structures and possibilities of queer become visible here. When it results in economic benefits, homosexuality is superficially accepted and even desired – however, only as long as it continues to take place within a framework that can be regulated at will. Consequently, there is a prevailing rejection of the self-determination of homosexual individuals. Drawing on Ahmed's theory to maintain public comfort discussed earlier, Alice and her actions are regulated and enforced by the structure of heteronormativity, by the guidelines placed upon her by the heterosexual environment. By abusing the existing power imbalances and employing tactics such as the threat of exclusion, exemplified through the termination of her contract, measures are taken to prevent the risk of her deviating from the norm. By addressing this reality, *The L Word* visualizes the pressure that a heteronormative society exerts on homosexual.

5 Conclusion

The increasing visibility of lesbian characters in popular media is impacted by a staging of a homonormative ideal, resulting in the prevention of a confrontation with divergences from heterosexual and heteronormative narratives. Showcasing and using compulsive heteronormative structures, such as the act of monogamous marriage and child-rearing, supports the preservation of a hierarchical system that promises a “happy life”

⁶⁶ The L Word: *Luck, Next Time*. 2004. Season 01, episode 09. TC: 00:31:26.

⁶⁷ The L Word: *Lesbians Gone Wild*. 2008. Season 05, episode 07. TC: 00:12:59.

for its participants, which places heterosexual individuals at the top.⁶⁸ The measures taken to ensure the continuation of this hierarchy quite plainly also influence the representation of queer narratives in television formats. Through these normative structures, desirable models of life emerge which are supported by and disseminated through media representations. The supposedly positive changes in representation discussed in this contribution make it clear that social acceptance is particularly steered by the alignment with heterosexual ideals. The politics of representation that are negotiated here under the guise of progress and commitment to diversity are therefore inadequate and allow the cis-heterosexual majority society to regulate queer identity, which, in order to gain respect and tolerance and recognition of its own identity, must not move too far away from the heteronormative standard in order to avoid losing the acquired rights. As a result, there is no space to address the needs of people from one's own community who do not meet this standard and thus endanger one's own existence. Thus, exclusion takes place within one's own ranks, as is evident, for example, in the debates on "marriage for all" which is not "for all" or in the debates on rights for trans* people. This pattern of perpetuating exclusion for the sake of progress can be observed in a variety of past political movements and its visualization in the media is therefore especially important. The utilization of shame emerges prominently as a means to impede deviation, as it portrays any existence outside the established norms as abnormal and undesirable, deterring queer individuals from associating with it. Consequently, formulating an ideal, which Ahmed identifies as a "form of comfort,"⁶⁹ necessitating orientation towards it to attain recognition, acceptance, and tolerance.

As my discussion of these two successful but also rare series featuring lesbian protagonists reveals, the staging of the social ideal of the lesbian woman operates through the affect of shame and connects it to normative images of femininity. The politics of representation at work here create an ideal image of the young lesbian woman which viewers should aspire to embody. It becomes evident that even a supposedly positive development such as the inclusion of representations of lesbians in popular media must continue to be critically observed and that the strategies of representation continue to specifically exclude people who do not live up to the ideals of society.

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⁶⁸ Ron Becker: *Gay TV and Straight America*. New Brunswick 2006, 4.

⁶⁹ Ahmed: *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 148.

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