

Homonationalism on TV?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Queer and Trans* Youth
Representations on Mainstream Teen Television Shows

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Abstract

As representations of queer and trans* youth become increasingly numerous and diverse in mainstream teen television, this thesis explores the social processes of normalization present in the elaboration of queer and trans* youth characters in the 2010-2011 seasons of *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi*. The methodology involves a critical discourse analysis of racialized queer youth identities on *Pretty Little Liars* and white trans* youth identities on *Degrassi*, complemented by an analysis of their political economy of production and their circulation of discourse surrounding sexuality and gender identity in online youth communities. Drawing upon literature on homonormativity and emerging literature on transnormativity in mainstream media texts, this thesis illustrates that despite their amenability to dominant social power structures, contemporary televisual representations of queer and trans* youth identities achieve meaningful cultural work through the creation of new societal frameworks for youth to engage with non-normative sexualities and gender identities.

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Introduction

For a brief period during the winter of 2011, queer youth appeared to be omnipresent in mainstream media. GLAAD¹ reported that for the 2010-2011 television season, “LGBT representations had increased for the third year in a row to a record percentage – 3.9% of scripted regular characters” on broadcast television, and an additional thirty-five LGBT characters on cable television (GLAAD, 2011a, 3). ABC Family, a cable television network, logged another record in terms of LGBT representation on television, with 55% of their programming hours being LGBT inclusive – “the highest GLAAD has ever tracked” (GLAAD, 2011b, 16). Entertainment Weekly ran a ‘special report’ on gay teens on television, calling this season “TV’s gay-teen revolution” (EW, 2011). Mainstream newspapers such as the *L.A. Times* also picked up on this phenomenon, noting the increasing number of queer youth in prominent roles on popular teen television shows (Friedlander, 2011). Online queer web publications wrote eagerly about the abundance of queer youth characters with articles titled, for example, “The Winter of Our Lesbian Content” and statements such as “this past season has been unquestionably the most [lesbian] of all time” (Bernard, 2011b). Excitement in both commercial and independent media aside, there are a lot of examples to draw from: *Pretty Little Liars*, *Glee*, *90210*, *Degrassi*, *Hellcats*, *Greek*, *Skins*, *Secret Life of An American Teenager*, and *Huge*, all teen television shows on US networks, featured at least one queer or trans* youth character during the 2010-2011 season (Friedlander, 2011; GLAAD, 2011a).

¹ GLAAD is a national US ‘media watchdog’ organization that monitors, promotes and advocates for media representations of LGBT populations. GLAAD releases an annual Network Responsibility Index (NRI) to evaluate the “quality and quantity of images of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people on television”, by tracking LGBT inclusive hours on broadcast and cable networks during primetime original programming and then assigning each network a rating (excellent, good, adequate, failing) (GLAAD, 2011b, 3). GLAAD defines the 2010-2011 season as June 1, 2010 – May 31, 2011 (GLAAD, 2011b, 3).

Many speculated, however, that this proliferation of queer youth on television was linked to the tide of queer youth suicides that gained substantial coverage in the mainstream news media in the fall of 2010. The rash of suicides also gave rise to a subsequent media focus on homophobic bullying that led to the creation of youth oriented anti-bullying campaigns such as *It Gets Better* and *Spirit Day* (Savage, 2013; GLAAD, 2012b). The *L.A. Times* frames their article in this way, noting that “teen coming out stories seem especially relevant, after reports of physical and cyber bullying reached a boiling point last year with a number of gay teen suicides”, and points to a number of storylines on television that deal with both physical and cyber bullying towards queer youth (Friedlander, 2011). Queer girl culture blog Autostraddle² speaks to what is implicit in this growing number of representations of queer youth, proclaiming: “We have voices now. We had to die first. To make it politically incorrect for anyone to vehemently protest seeing gay kids on TV. Because how can you do that, when they’re being bullied like that, when it’s killing them”, explicitly linking the hypervisibility of queer youth on television to broader media narratives of queer youth suicides (Bernard, 2011a).

It is not only this environment of hypervisibility of queer youth on television that is significant about the 2010-2011 television season – we also saw an important diversification of queer youth identities. Historically, the bulk of queer representations on television has been cisgender, white and male; even during this record-setting season, women and girls represented less than 30% of queer representations on both cable and broadcast, queer people of colour represented only 19% of queer representations on broadcast and 23% on cable, and there was only one recurring trans* character on cable, and none on broadcast (GLAAD,

² Autostraddle is an independent website that focuses on “news, entertainment and girl-on-girl culture” (autostraddle.com). One of the major online publications that caters to queer girls, Autostraddle often covers topics related to pop cultural representations of queer girls and women.

2011b; GLAAD 2011a).³ Similar trends can be noted among queer youth populations specifically: before the 2010-2011 season, the only instances of recurring teenage lesbian characters were on the 2001 season of *Buffy*, the 2002 season of *Once and Again*, the 2005 season of *South of Nowhere*, and the 2005 season of *Degrassi*, and only one of these recurring characters was racialized (Driver, 2006, 57; Beirne, 2008, 42; Bernard, 2011a); additionally, there were no recurring trans* youth characters on television whatsoever (GLAAD, 2010). In contrast, the 2010-2011 season includes racialized queer girls as main characters on both *Pretty Little Liars* and *Glee*, and television's first trans* youth character, in addition to, of course, many cisgender, white, gay boys and lesbian or questioning girls featured on the aforementioned list of teen television shows with queer representation (GLAAD, 2011a).

These increasing – and increasingly diverse – representations of queer and trans* youth become important within the context of queer and trans* youth's interaction with these characters. When representations of queer youth on television are few and far between, queer viewers have to rely on the existing characters to speak for their lives, experiences and communities (GLAAD, 2011b). Queer pop culture website AfterEllen⁴ speaks to the significance of this relationship, stating that: “If your favourite lesbian character stops resonating with you, you can't just channel-flip until you find another one. Nothing is scarier or more enraging than feeling like your own reflection is being smudged or stripped away” (Hogan, 2011a). Queer girl culture blog Autostraddle similarly asks: “Isn't it amazing? That we have a choice now? That Willow [of *Buffy*] is no longer speaking for the entire group?”

³ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics, trends and examples apply specifically to US television networks. *Degrassi*, though a Canadian show, runs simultaneously on the US network Teen Nick; additionally, many of the US shows noted run simultaneously on Canadian channels. UK shows, though important for the literature review, are not part of the overall context for this thesis, and when included, are specifically noted as such.

⁴ AfterEllen is an official website of LOGO TV and chronicles lesbian and bisexual representation in pop culture (afterellen.com).

(Bernard, 2011a), referencing the newfound selection queer girls searching for recognition can now find on television. This context of hypervisibility and diversification of queer youth on television, and the potential for recognition and validation of queer and trans* youth it provides, represents a frame of reference for this thesis.

Research Question

This thesis will analyze representations of queer and trans* youth⁵ on television within the particular cultural context in which they are produced, consumed and engaged with – the current hypervisibility and diversification of queer and trans* youth in mainstream media. Television, as a mainstream mass medium, exists and operates within dominant social power structures, particularly those of heteronormativity and homonormativity, as well as racism, sexism and classism. Homonormativity is the process by which certain queer identities gain inclusion in heteronormative institutions through access to, and a reinforcement of, gendered, racialized and classed privileges (Duggan, 2003; Sender, 2012).⁶ The objective of this thesis will be to examine the heteronormative and homonormative dimensions of these

⁵Queer youth are defined in this thesis as youth who self-identify with non-heteronormative sexualities, generally understood to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, fluid or questioning sexualities. Queer can be used in many different ways: its origins in queer theory were to disrupt the heterosexual/homosexual binary and highlight the fluid and non-fixed nature of sexuality (Sedgwick, 2008); it can be used to politicize sexuality and challenge hetero- and homo-normative definitions of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ (Sender, 2012); it is also often used as an umbrella term to denote people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, trans, transgender, genderqueer, two-spirit or other non-normative gender identities or sexualities (Kern, 2012). This thesis will attempt to use queer only in reference to non-normative sexualities, and when referring to non-normative gender identities, will use trans*, though when referencing media representations that do not necessarily differentiate between sexuality and gender identity, this may not always be possible. Trans* youth are defined in this thesis as youth who self-identify with non-normative gender identities, generally understood to mean transgender, transsexual, genderqueer or other non-binary genders. Debates among the use of transgender, trans or trans* as an umbrella term for non-normative gender identities are ongoing within academic and non-academic communities (Heinz, 2012; Bauer et al., 2009 quoted in Heinz, 2012; Cavanaugh, 2010), and though I have chosen to use trans* as, hopefully, an inclusive umbrella term, I recognize that it “posits a uniform collectivity and cannot do justice to the myriad differences subsumed into the category” (Cavanaugh, 2010). I use transgender or trans interchangeably (Keegan, 2013) when referring specifically to individual youth who self-identify as transgender.

⁶ The term “homonormativity” is borrowed from Lisa Duggan and will be extensively detailed in Chapter 1. In general, it refers to how certain queer identities become seen as acceptable and normalized in a heteronormative society.

representations of queer and trans* youth. This thesis will concentrate not only on the amenability of these representations to dominant normative structures but also on the possibilities for resistance they offer within these structures in the form of celebratory representational milestones of non-normative sexualities and gender identities in youth.

This thesis will focus on two cultural texts: the 2010-2011 Season 1 of *Pretty Little Liars*, which airs on ABC Family in the US and Much Music in Canada, and the 2010-2011 Season 10 of *Degrassi*, which airs on Teen Nick in the US as well as Much Music in Canada. Within *Pretty Little Liars*, I will concentrate my analysis on the character Emily Fields, a racialized sixteen year old girl who identifies as gay, and I will analyze the character Adam Torres in *Degrassi*, a white fifteen year old boy who identifies as transgender. I am interested in what these representations of queer and trans* youth in mainstream mass media texts tell us about the role of queerness in North American youth cultures as queerness becomes increasingly visible – and by extension increasingly normalized. The specific research questions addressed by this thesis are: What social processes are at play in this context of hypervisibility and diversification of queerness in youth on television? Why are the particular stories of Emily and Adam being told? Whose stories were ignored in order to tell theirs? And most importantly, what is the cultural work being done by the telling of their stories⁷?

In order to address these questions, I will undertake a critical discourse analysis of Season 1 of *Pretty Little Liars* and Season 10 of *Degrassi*, along with a brief study of their political economy of production and an analysis of the circulation of online discourse

⁷ The term “cultural work” is borrowed from cultural studies theorists such as Paula Treichler, Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg and is understood to reference the connection between the “symbolic and material domains” of culture, or the connection between cultural practices (such as texts) and “ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions and structures of power” (1992, 5).

surrounding sexuality and gender identity these shows generate among youth viewers. This thesis hypothesizes that these current representations of queer and trans* youth on television do meaningful cultural work even while existing within structures of heteronormativity and homonormativity in that they help to subvert normative structures and to provide new possibilities for youth to engage with gender identity and sexuality. In other words, this thesis strives to recognize as well as critique the important cultural work that can be done by less than perfect representations of marginalized identities in that they can help us create new societal frameworks (Sedgwick, 2003; Magnet, 2005). In particular, this thesis suggests that current representations of non-normative sexualities and gender identities in youth on television have the potential to disrupt the processes of normalization by which non-normative sexualities and gender identities generally gain mainstream status, while simultaneously existing within hetero- and homo- normative structures that require these processes of normalization. These competing discourses surrounding queerness in youth interact in complex ways that can both reinforce and disrupt existing societal frameworks for sexuality and gender identity, and by extension, create new frameworks. In this case, these potential new societal frameworks are those of youth sexuality and youth gender identity enabled by the popular mainstream teen television shows *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi*.

Emily's Secret: ABC Family's Pretty Little Liars

Pretty Little Liars is a teen mystery drama that airs on ABC Family in the US and Much Music in Canada (ABC Family, 2013; Much Music, 2013a). Based on the books by Sara Shepard and created and executive produced by Marlene King, the first season premiered on June 8, 2010 with 2.47 million viewers, ABC Family's "no. 1 series launch on record across target 18-34 and 12-34 demographics, teens and female teens" (Neilson Media Research, 2010). That same day, ABC Family's website had more than half a million unique

visitors – constituting the busiest day the site had ever had to date (Neilson Media Research, 2010). *Pretty Little Liars* continued to pull in 2.5 million viewers over the summer of 2010, and when it returned for its winter premiere on January 3, 2011 it did so to the tune of 4.22 million viewers, making it cable’s most viewed series premiere of the 2010-2011 season across all its target demographics, including female teens (Neilson Media Research, 2011).

This popular show centers around four teenage girls – a close knit group of best friends who drifted apart after the disappearance turned murder of the leader of their group. This girl, Alison, was both a bully and a mentor to the girls. Each of the four girls has a ‘secret’, mostly relating to romantic and/or sexual transgressions. The show begins when the girls start receiving text messages from ‘A.’, who appears to know all of their deepest, most private secrets, and who threatens to reveal them if the girls don’t do A.’s bidding (ABC Family, 2013). Season 1 follows the girls as they deal with high school, family and relationship drama, alongside near-constant cyber-bullying, funerals, and police investigations. Themes include friendship, bullying, mystery and grief (ABC Family, 2013).

The introduction of a queer girl main character, Emily Fields, from the onset of the show sets *Pretty Little Liars* apart within the genre of teen television. In the series premiere, we discover that Emily’s ‘secret’ is that she likes girls; she also meets a female love interest with whom she immediately displays physical affection and strong chemistry (Season 1, Episode 1: ‘Pilot’). By the third episode, Emily has kissed a girl, by mid-season, she comes out to her parents, and in the season finale, Emily remains secure in her queer identity (Season 1, Episode 3: ‘To Kill A Mocking Girl’; Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’; Episode 22: ‘For Whom The Bell Tolls’). Though a few sustained queer girl storylines have existed in teen television since the mid-2000s, for example, *Buffy*, *South of Nowhere* and *Degrassi* (Beirne, 2008b, 42), these storylines generally take place a few seasons into the series

(Bernard, 2010b).⁸ Not surprisingly, the reaction to Emily's character by online queer and lesbian communities was extremely positive. AfterEllen and Autostraddle, two major queer girl pop culture websites, immediately began recapping *Pretty Little Liars*, often focusing specifically on Emily's storyline (Hogan, 2010a; Bernard, 2010a). Following the mid-season finale, Autostraddle excitedly noted that Emily's storyline was refreshingly unconventional within the genre in that "the entire first season of *Pretty Little Liars* happened in which a queer female character did not end the season either less gay or less alive than she entered it" (Bernard, 2010b). Additionally noteworthy is how *Pretty Little Liars* producers and cast interact with online lesbian communities. During the first season alone, Shay Mitchell, the actress who plays Emily, Bianca Lawson, who plays Emily's girlfriend, and creator/executive producer Marlene King were all interviewed by AfterEllen and speak specifically to the pride and importance they feel towards Emily's character and storyline (Hogan, 2010b; Hogan, 2010c). In her interview, Shay Mitchell notes that she has received extremely positive feedback from teenage girls who credit her character with helping them to begin conversations regarding their sexuality with the people in their lives (Hogan, 2010b), demonstrating the significance of *Pretty Little Liars* not only in terms of viewers and online popularity but in the real lives of queer youth viewers.

Breaking Ground: Degrassi and TV's first trans youth main character*

Degrassi is a Canadian teen drama that currently airs on Much Music in Canada and Teen Nick in the US (Much Music, 2013b; Teen Nick; 2013). Known for its willingness to address difficult and often controversial issues in youth's lives in realistic and authentic ways, *Degrassi* is currently in its twelfth season (Much Music, 2013b; Myers, 2005). With a

⁸ I am referring solely to US and Canadian teen television. *Sugar Rush*, a teen show featuring a queer girl character that ran from 2005-2006 on the UK Channel 4, featured a female main character whose queerness was established in the series premiere (Zeller-Jacques, 2011).

target audience of teenage viewers 13-18, *Degrassi*'s youth characters are portrayed by teenage actors, a rarity in teen television (Much Music, 2013b). *Degrassi* also uses web and social media to interact with their viewers, and the teenage cast often appears on other Much Music shows, such as *New Music Live* or news/interview shows (Much Music, 2013b). The *Degrassi* franchise dates back to 1980 with *The Kids of Degrassi Street*, and the subsequent *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High*, which ended in 1991 and previously aired on CBC in Canada and PBS in the US (Canadian Press, 2012; Myers, 2005). When *Degrassi: The Next Generation* returned in 2001, it began airing on CTV in Canada before moving to Much Music in 2010, and Teen Nick in the US (Canadian Press, 2010; Myers, 2005). Though *Degrassi* has not always enjoyed the highest ratings, the show is critically acclaimed, having won a Television Critics Association Award, a Peabody Award, Teen Choice Awards and Gemini Awards (Much Music, 2013b).

Degrassi's excellent history of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth characters sets it apart from other teen television shows. The 2003-2004 season featured a main character, Marco, coming out as gay and continued his storyline for another five seasons; the 2005-2006 season included a queer storyline between main character Paige and recurring character Alex, who later came out as a lesbian; the 2008-2009 season featured two gay male characters in athletes Riley and Zane; and current seasons include two queer female characters, Fiona and Imogen (Bernard, 2011c; GLAAD, 2011b; Friedlander, 2011). In the 2010-2011 season, *Degrassi* introduces their first trans youth character in main character Adam Torres, an addition described as "uncharted ground" by the Canadian Press (2010), "brand new territory" by *Degrassi* producer Stefan Brogen (Canadian Press, 2010), and "groundbreaking" by GLAAD (GLAAD, 2012a). Adam is, in fact, "the first transgender teen character to appear as a series regular on a scripted TV show" (GLAAD, 2010), which

explains the media excitement surrounding his character. In an interview with the Canadian Press, *Degrassi* producer Brogan speaks to the difference between portraying gender identity based storylines from those dealing with sexuality, stating that “of course we’ve dealt with gay and lesbian stories but you can’t approach this the same way” (Canadian Press, 2010). Both *Much Music* and *Teen Nick* also consulted with GLAAD while writing for Adam’s character in an attempt to “make the portrayal of Adam’s character fair and accurate” (GLAAD, 2010), understanding the potential for harm in Adam’s character and their responsibility towards trans* youth (Canadian Press, 2010). In Season 10, Adam’s character deals with the revelation of his trans status to peers at his new high school, transphobic bullying, relationships with friends, family and love interests, as well as his first romantic relationship (Much Music, 2013b). Despite these efforts to ensure that Adam’s character is a positive and authentic representation of trans* youth, Adam’s character is not without its critics. For example, Adam is portrayed by a cisgender female actress, Jordan Todosey, while many suggest that trans* characters should be portrayed by trans* actors (Pipenburg, 2011). Nonetheless, trans* youth have contacted Todosey suggesting that they have been able to use Adam’s storyline as means to start a conversation with friends and family about their gender identity, demonstrating the potential for positive effects on trans* youth of Adam’s character (Prendergast, 2012).

Choice of text

This thesis is particularly interested in analyzing new and diverse queer and trans* youth identities on television, and therefore necessitates youth characters whose identities are newly represented in the teen television genre, such as trans* youth and racialized queer female youth. Despite the increasingly numerous and diverse representations of queer youth on television, the number of mainstream teen television shows with self-identified queer girl

or trans* characters is still limited. As a result, this research necessitates a purposeful sampling of television shows that have explicit representation of queer girls and trans* youth as subjects (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). The sample for this research is as follows: the first season of *Pretty Little Liars* and the tenth season of *Degrassi*, both airing during the 2010-2011 season in which queer and trans* youth characters gained significant media attention. I chose these two television shows for their explicitly queer and trans* characters and storylines, the continuity and longevity of these characters and storylines, and their portrayal of diverse identities – in this case, white trans boys and racialized queer girls. Additionally, these television shows interact with youth viewers through social media in often innovative ways, such as through producer, cast and character twitter accounts, online interviews, video clips, quizzes, polls and behind-the-scenes features (Much Music, 2013b; ABC Family, 2013). Their emphasis on social media interaction with youth viewers allows for an analysis of how discourse surrounding sexuality and gender identity circulate among youth viewers. I also selected *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi* due to their status as highly viewed and popular shows on television networks aimed at youth (ABC Family, Much Music, Teen Nick), demonstrating their significance among youth populations.

Specifically, I chose *Degrassi* for its character of Adam, the first trans* youth main character on television. As a result, *Degrassi* represents the only possible text in which to analyze televisual representations of trans* youth in the 2010-2011 season. Though I recognize it is of the utmost importance to not conflate sexuality and gender identity, my decision to analyze representations of both non-normative sexualities and gender identities in this thesis stems from a desire to not further marginalize trans* youth. There is a long history of excluding trans* subjects from academic research, advocacy organizations, legislation, and media coverage, that purports to cover LGBT populations, but in reality focuses only on

lesbian, gay and bisexual populations. I do not wish for my research to participate in this exclusion and marginalization of trans* subjects by analyzing representations of queer youth and not trans* youth as well.

The character of Adam on *Degrassi* also represents a unique opportunity to analyze what processes are at play as non-normative gender identities become visible in mainstream media such as television. As I will detail in my theoretical framework, when queer identities became increasingly visible on television, they simultaneously underwent processes of normalization that lead to predominantly cisgender, white, upper-middle class, mostly gay male identities being represented, rather than a diversity of queer identities (Duggan, 2003; Becker, 2006). As a result, these cisgender, white, upper-middle class queer identities became synonymous with queerness in mainstream society, further marginalizing and erasing queer identities that do not fit into this narrow category of queerness (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007). Adam's character could represent a similar process surrounding the normalization and mainstreaming of trans* identities for consumption by mass media audiences, or his character could represent a subversive potential for a new direction in representation of non-normative identities – one that does not require a simultaneous mainstreaming and normalization. Adam's character could, for example, reinforce heteronormativity, class privilege and/or racialized privilege in a similar manner to normalized queer characters, or he could disrupt these same structures of privilege. Either way, an analysis of Adam's character allows us to question why and how non-normative gender identities become fit for mainstream representation, and how this is different and/or similar to processes by which non-normative sexualities become visible.⁹

⁹ I do not wish to suggest that one main trans* youth character on television necessarily means that trans* identities have reached a certain degree of normalization and by extension, acceptance by mainstream society. I

Similarly, *Pretty Little Liars* was chosen for its character of Emily Fields, a racialized cisgender queer girl whose racialized status is occasionally highlighted, but more often erased. As a normalization of queer identities has often been synonymous with a whitening of queer identities (Puar, 2007), Emily's character allows for an analysis of processes by which racialized queerness becomes visible, or in combination with the erasure of her racialization, further invisible. As with Adam's character, Emily's character allows for a deepening of our understanding of normalization, commodification, mainstreaming and their relationship to diverse queer identities. Emily and Adam's characters represent a potential for further understanding these processes of normalization within the current context of hypervisibility and a diversification of queer identities.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis

This thesis adopts a critical discourse analytic approach in order to address representations of queer and trans* youth on *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi* and the way in which they circulate and incite discourse among youth within the online communities of abcfamily.com, afterellen.com, and degrassiblog.com. Critical discourse analysis allows for discursive constructions of homonormativity and its various iterations in queer and trans* youth identities to be read through representations of queer and trans* youth on television and the online discourse surrounding these representations. Pioneered by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, the aim of critical discourse analysis is to study the “relationships of causality and determination between a) discursive practices, events and texts and b) wider social and cultural relations and processes” while at the same time elucidating the power

am simply pointing to literature that suggests that queer identities become normalized as they become visible and am questioning how this applies to trans* identities.

structures that shape, and are shaped by, these discourses (1995, 132). In this case, discourse is understood in the Foucauldian sense as not only specific sets of knowledge that allow us to understand the world through, for example, verbal and non-verbal language, but also as a practice, or way of knowing, that produces the contours of how we are able to act within the world (Locke, 2004, 5; Rose, 2012, 190). Discourse is also inherently linked to dominant, and often competing, ideologies: ideologies are perpetuated through discourse, and as such become seen as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’, which in turn camouflages the power structures which they maintain (Lazar, 2005, 6). Critical discourse analysis relies on Foucauldian analyses of power; power that is discursive in nature and is therefore acted and re-enacted “in the talk and text of everyday life” in often invisible ways (Lazar, 2005, 9).

Interdiscursive critical discourses analysis, one form of critical discourse analysis, emphasizes the multiple discourses that can be present in a single text. Many texts contain multiple and often competing discourses, in which case the task becomes not only to recognize these discourses but also the relationship between them (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005, 14). This particular interdiscursive analytic approach was employed by Lazar in her study of gender relations within a set of government advertisements in Singapore, where she found there were two prominent competing discourses on gender relations, one espousing traditional views on gender roles and one adopting more modern views (2005, 14).

Interdiscursive analyses, such as Lazar’s example, allow the researcher to determine the ways in which one particular set of discourses achieves dominance over the other(s).

Interdiscursive analyses also allow for multiple readings and interpretations of a single text, for example, a text could contain discursive representations of both heteronormativity and homonormativity, and these multiple discourses should be analyzed in relation to one another. This emphasis on multiple discourses makes interdiscursive analysis appropriate for

identifying changing discourses surrounding complex identities, such as gender or sexual identities (Lazar, 2005, 14).

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

This focus on the social construction of discourses that maintain hegemonic power structures makes critical discourse analysis useful as a feminist approach to studying texts. Feminist critical discourse analyses “examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk” specifically as they relate to gendered power relations (Lazar, 2005, 10). In other words, feminist approaches to critical discourse analysis allow us to recognize, examine and critique how gender, power and ideology play out in texts to produce discourse that maintains patriarchal structures through the systematic privileging of certain gender identities over others (Lazar, 2005, 5).¹⁰ Discourse analysis allows feminist researchers to interrogate discursive social constructions of difference while focusing on gender and how it interacts with other social markers of difference, such as racialization, sexuality, class and (dis)ability, making it useful for critical studies of marginalized identities (Leavy, 2007, 226). A belief in the ability to utilize theory to achieve social resistance and change, to which critical discourse analysis subscribes, also makes it particularly appropriate for critical feminist research (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005, 6). Lazar qualifies feminist critical discourse analysis as a “praxis oriented research” (Lazar, 2005, 6), highlighting this connection between theory and practice, while others, such as Fairclough, speak to the importance of language – often the creation of new language – in social resistance movements (Fairclough, 1995).

¹⁰ Lazar frames her argument in terms of the ways in which ‘men’ are privileged over ‘women’. I borrowed this framework to talk about gender in non-binary terms, while still acknowledging patriarchy as the dominant social order of gender.

Queer Critical Discourse Analysis

Similar to feminist critical discourse analysis, queer approaches to critical discourse analyses also allow the researcher to explore how particular power structures around gender and sexuality are discursively produced and maintained. When researching representations of queerness in cultural texts, discourse analysis is particularly helpful in highlighting connections between the text, its production and its reception (Browne, 2010, 6; Peters, 2006, 15). The flexibility and complexity critical discourse analysis allows for when analyzing texts makes it amenable to queer approaches to research practices in that it “allows for the exploration of difference, contestation of rigid categories as well as addressing moments of disturbance, breaks and unfixity” (Browne, 2010, 235). Queer research is not simply about looking at marginalized identities in terms of gender and sexuality or looking at queer subject positions and/or representations; it also calls for the breaking down of binaries and categories and promoting fluidity and disruption. In this way, flexible qualitative research methods such as critical discourse analysis can much more easily be queered than quantitative approaches that depend upon restrictive and inflexible identity categories, for example. For this reason, critical discourse analysis works well for research that seeks to recognize and critique homonormativity and not simply heteronormativity. Browne explains that when “looking at sexual lives that were once considered ‘deviant’ and are now privileged through state recognition – alongside class, gender, ethnicity”, it is important to use methodologies that will not lose the complexity of these theories during the data analysis process (2010, 235). An interdiscursive analytic approach that recognizes the competing discourses of heteronormativity and homonormativity within representations of queerness is useful for complex discursive constructions such as homonationalism.

Critical Discourse Analysis in Visual Studies

Visual texts, such as the television shows I will be examining, require particular forms of critical discourse analysis that take into account the many different aspects of a visual image. Scholars who study visual images refer to three sites where the social meanings of an image are produced: the site of production, the site of the image itself and the site of audiencing (Rose, 2012, 19). A critical and comprehensive analysis of visual images needs to examine all three of these sites of meaning, looking not only at text itself, but also understanding the importance of the social context/location in which the image is produced as well as the varied ways in which audiences will interpret these images (Rose, 2012, 16; Leavy, 2007, 229). In *Visual Methodologies*, Rose eloquently elaborates that “to understand a visualization is thus to enquire into its provenance and into the social work it does...to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalizes” (2012, 12), underscoring the necessity of a methodology that focuses on social difference within these visual images. Critical discourse analysis of visual images should not neglect any of the three sites of meaning, and should be performed on all three sites, or used in conjunction with audience reception studies, textual analysis or similar methods.

Television Studies

Scholars in the field of television studies advocate for the use of this three-pronged approach to the analysis of television shows, where the political economy of production, the television show itself, and audience reception of the show are all analyzed (Peters, 2006; 15; Brunson and Spigel, 2008, 12). For example, in Peters’ study of representations of sexuality, gender, racialization and class on *Queer as Folk*, she firstly analyzes the political

economy of production of *QAF* in relation to the networks on which it airs, secondly, she provides a critical textual analysis of marginalized identities on *QAF*, lastly, she undertakes an audience reception study through surveys, focus groups and interviews with viewers of *QAF* (Peters, 2006, 12). Sometimes termed a “multi-perspectival research model”, this approach allows the researcher to comprehensively examine the text and its societal effects, though, as Peters cautions, it limits the level of detail possible in each particular section of the analysis (Peters, 2006, 15). Brunson and Spigel echo this concern by acknowledging that while it is never possible to analyze every aspect of a single text, one should “attempt to understand the multiple pressures put on texts by the industry, by writers and producers, by the people who interpret them, by censorship or regulation, and by the larger discursive and social context in which programmes circulate” (2008, 12). There are many different possible methods that support a comprehensive analysis such as has been described, and researchers should adapt this research model to their particular text(s).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

In applying critical discourse analysis to audiovisual images, many scholars point to three main fields of analysis: dialogue/textual/language, visual image (including gestures, action, layout) and sound (Leavy, 2007, 242; Lazar, 2005, 5). This “multimodal dimension” of critical discourse analysis allows the researcher to not simply focus on language, but to pay attention to the many different “semiotic modalities” (visual image, sound, action, gestures, layout, etc.) in which discourse is produced in texts such as television shows (Lazar, 2005, 12). Leavy explains that the key to working with discursive constructions in audiovisual texts is to understand that “the content of these narratives emerges from the interplay or fusion of the visual, sound and textual components” (2007, 242). In other words, discourse on homonormativity will not be found solely in the dialogue and storyline of a

particular television show, but in the ways in which this storyline and dialogue are delivered through layout, gestures, actions and sound. Dialogue, visual images and sound are all considered data in this form of critical discourse analysis, and data analysis should be both implicit and explicit. Lazar explains that critical discourse analysis should seek to analyze subtle and implicit “renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations in contemporary societies”, as well as what is clear or explicit in a particular image (2005, 13). In order to do so, a “thematic analysis” where inductive categories emerge from the data analysis itself is often most useful (Leavy, 2007, 228). For a visual text, Rose suggests identifying key themes (key words and/or recurring images) during a first study of the images, and then returning to code all the images individually using these key words and images during a second study. Once key words and images have been coded, the researcher should begin to look for connections between and among them, analyzing their potential meanings while being aware of contradictions within the discourse and reading for what is invisible as well as visible (Rose, 2012, 213). She elaborates that critical discourse analysis is a flexible method and it is always possible to return to the images with new categories and interpretations (Rose, 2012, 215). This flexibility means that there is no set way to carry out a critical discourse analysis and that is easily adaptable to various texts, as the focus of analysis is always not the images themselves but the power relations they produce and maintain (Machin & Mayr, 2012, 10).

Analytic Method

My own research methodology is adapted from this three-pronged approach to studying television as a pop cultural text described by Peters and Brundon and Spigel (political economy of production, the television show itself, and audience reception) and Rose’s three sites of meaning in visual images (site of production, site of the image and site

of audiencing). The main section of my thesis will apply critical discourse analysis to the discursive constructions of homonormativity by focusing on gender identity, sexuality and racialization as represented by Emily Fields on *Pretty Little Liars* and Adam on *Degrassi*. As I am particularly interested in the competing (and sometimes complementary) discourses of homonormativity and heteronormativity, my analysis will be interdiscursive in nature and I will focus on how complex discourses such as bullying/tolerance/acceptance, sameness/difference and normativity/perverseness interact and compete for dominance. An interdiscursive analysis will allow me to identify changing discourses surrounding, for example, youth queerness in televisual representations by emphasizing the presence of multiple discourses in my chosen cultural texts. I will follow Rose's visual images analytic method and study the shows by identifying key themes in the form of key dialogue and images. In this first study, I will also identify relevant episodes and scenes of each season for the purposes of this thesis. Once these themes have been identified, I will return to my notes on these relevant episodes and code each one in relation to these key themes. I will then study the key episodes and scenes a third time and look for connections between these key themes, focusing this time more on the overall themes that have emerged rather than detailed dialogue and images. Following Lazar and Leavy's example, I will adopt a multimodal approach and study the dialogue, sound, and visual aspects, including gestures, actions and layout in each chosen scene.

This interdiscursive critical discourse analysis of the text will be complemented by a brief study of the political economy of production of both *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi*, focusing on the context in which they are produced in terms of the mandates of the networks on which they air, as well as their respective writers and producers. Finally, I will adapt the purpose of audience reception studies for a thesis of this length by undertaking a critical

discourse analysis of discussions surrounding *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi* on three websites. The comments on online episodes of *Pretty Little Liars* available at abcfamily.com, as well as the recaps on afterellen.com will allow me to study how *Pretty Little Liars* circulates among youth online. As for *Degrassi*, I will use the comments on the recaps available at degrassiblog.com, as online episodes of the tenth season of *Degrassi* are not currently available online. I will identify three or four key episodes per television show, and analyze only the online comment sections on these episodes in order to stay within the scope of this thesis.

In this case, the comment section of episodes on abcfamily.com and the comment sections of episode recaps on afterellen.com and degrassiblog.com denote a section at the bottom of the webpage in which users can log in to the website (with a username connected to their email address) and comment on the content of the webpage (often known as the original web post). In the case of afterellen.com and degrassiblog.com, users can also comment directly on a previous user's comment, not simply the original web post, and therefore enter into direct conversations with one another. For example, on degrassiblog.com, users can comment on the episode recap (the original web post), or can comment on another user's comment on the episode recap. Comment sections of individual web pages (i.e. recap of one episode) on abcfamily.com, afterellen.com and degrassiblog.com can have anywhere from no comments to hundreds of comments.

I do not wish to conflate queer and trans* youth identities and my key focus of analysis will be sexuality in *Pretty Little Liars* and gender identity in *Degrassi*. Methodological concerns include the use of specific labels applied to characters' identities. While enforcing or reproducing rigid identity categories would not be in line with either the theoretical framework or overall objective of this thesis, I wish to acknowledge that this

thesis analyzes representations that already exist; it is not creating original representations and subsequently applying labels to them. In other words, characters have self-identified as gay (Emily) and transgender (Adam). Adam the character describes himself as transgender and as male (*Degrassi*, Season 10 Episode 16: ‘My Body Is A Cage’). Emily the character describes herself as female and gay, and is also racialized, though her racialization is at times highlighted and at others erased (*Pretty Little Liars*, Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). While Emily is never explicitly referred to as a person of colour, nor does she ever specifically identify as a person of colour, she and her family are racialized and classed in ways that portray them as different from other families on the show. For example, her family subscribes to traditional gender roles in that her father is in the military and serves overseas while her mother stays at home, and her parents are shown as more protective of her than the parents of other characters (*Pretty Little Liars*, Season 1, Episodes 1-22). These self-identified labels will be used to describe these characters in this thesis, and they will be analyzed using strategies that have been developed for queer girl representations and transgender representations respectively, while also recognizing the necessary fluidity of identity markers.

Outline of Thesis

This introduction has outlined the context of hypervisibility and diversification of queer and trans* youth identities in media and pop culture within in which my analysis of televisual representations of queer and trans* youth takes place and the research questions that frame this analysis, as well as outlining my choice of texts for analysis – teen television shows *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi* – and my critical discourse analytic method. Chapter 1 will outline the theoretical framework for this research, elaborating on the societal processes at play in the televisual representation of non-normative sexualities and gender

identities and summarizing the literature relevant to representations of queer and trans* youth on television. I then proceed to the analysis portion of this thesis in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of non-normative sexuality in youth on *Pretty Little Liars*, beginning with a study of its political economy of production, proceeding to a critical discourse analysis of its construction of youth queerness and finally offering an analysis of the circulation of this discourse surrounding non-normative sexualities among online youth communities. Similarly, Chapter 3 provides an analysis of non-normative gender identity on *Degrassi*, beginning with a study of its political economy of production, proceeding to a critical discourse analysis of its construction of trans youth and finally offering an analysis of the circulation of this discourse surrounding non-normative gender identity among online youth communities. A final concluding chapter offers a summary of findings regarding contemporary mass media constructions of queer and trans* youth, focusing on their simultaneous reinforcement and disruption of dominant hetero- and homo- normative structures.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework and relevant literature

Television studies and feminist television criticism

Television studies developed as an academic discipline in the 1970s, stemming from cultural criticism, film studies, sociology, and mass communication studies, among other social science disciplines, establishing itself as interdisciplinary early on (Fiske, 2003, xi; Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, 1). Heavily influenced by the then prevalence of class as the main component of socio-cultural research, early work in television studies sought to “critique, contest and control the media’s productive capacity, to limit their socio-cultural and ideological reach and curtail their politico-commercial power” (Fiske, 2003, xii). As this pervasiveness of class gave way to other marginalities, such as gender, racialization and sexuality (Peters, 2006, 34), sub-disciplines of television studies, such as feminist television criticism became more prominent (Fiske, 2003, xix). Feminist television criticism demonstrated that existing television scholarship relied on a very narrow definition of the ‘political’ that often left out gender and sexuality, and one of its primary aims was to “include a general interest in everyday life, especially the female-associated spheres of domesticity and consumerism” in conceptions of the political (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, 7). Feminist television research brought gender into the spotlight, focusing specifically on representations of women, shows targeted at women, and women’s interactions with television as a medium. However, feminist television scholars often researched through a straight, white, middle-class lens; for example, audience reception studies, such as Andrea Press’ (1991) *Women Watching Television* and Ellen Seiter and Jacqueline Bobo’s (1991) “Black Feminism and Media Criticism: The Women of Brewster Place” were instrumental in highlighting the extent to which racialized women were marginalized within the field (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, 10). Only more recently has feminist television criticism

engaged with representations of racialized women and queer women (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, 10).

Queer television studies: A brief introduction

Queer television studies builds on the work done by feminist television criticism to analyze televisual representations of marginalized identities, and this first section examines key debates in the field: visibility/invisibility, the normalization of queer identities, and evaluative approaches to studying queer representations. Early research in queer television studies examined issues of visibility and positive/negative representations, analyzing characters and storylines in terms of their helpful or harmful contributions to the queer visibility and rights movement (Beirne, 2008a; Burgess, 2008; Davis and Needham, 2009; Peters, 2006). Television as a medium “has been widely fetishized as the ultimate conferrer of visibility” (Beirne, 2008b, 46), due to its mainstream status, serial structure and the images it conjures of domesticity, family and nostalgia. Queer visibility on television is viewed on the one hand as an obvious step up from invisibility, a chance to be understood by and participate in mainstream audiences, to be treated ‘just like everyone else’; on the other hand, as a sort of compromise of authenticity, where the diversity of queer identities are sanitized for consumption by mainstream audiences (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 212). Speaking specifically to lesbian representation, Susan Wolfe and Lee Ann Roripaugh describe this debate in terms of “assimilationist visibility vs. marginalized invisibility” (2008, 212), explaining that the normalizing tendencies which accompany greater visibility are often at the expense of the further marginalization of identities that nevertheless retain their diversity. Nuanced discussions of visibility and invisibility point out that these are not mutually exclusive scenarios, and that certain ‘authentic’ queer identities do indeed become visible at the same time as other, also ‘authentic’ queer identities remain invisible.

Visibility/invisibility scholarship also relies on the idea that “negative representations equal harm” (Beirne, 2008b, 17). Negative representations are presumed to be stereotypical representations, and the perpetuation of these inevitably unrealistic stereotypes harms marginalized identities. Though stereotypical representations can indeed have harmful effects on the public’s conception of an identity, it is not necessarily the negative or unrealistic aspect of a stereotype that makes it potentially harmful; it is also the construction and perpetuation of a singular representation of a diverse identity (Halberstam, 1998, 180). Stereotypes can be (at least partially) based on real-life identities, and a denial of their authenticity is a denial of the existence of these identities. For example, representations of masculine lesbians have frequently been deemed stereotypical, and by extension, negative, but this denies the identities of many lesbians who do, in fact, have masculine presentations and/or identify with masculinity (Beirne, 2008b, 46; Halberstam, 1998, 180). Qualifying a stereotypical representation as negative also presumes that a consensus exists as to what constitutes a stereotypical representation in the first place (Beirne, 2008b, 17). It is difficult to argue that a stereotypical representation is inherently, unquestionably negative, and discussion of visibility/invisibility are productive only to the extent that they operate from nuanced conceptions of positive/negative representations.

Queer television studies: Identities and normalization

As queer characters and storylines become more frequent on mainstream television shows, queer television scholars move beyond the visibility and invisibility binary and focus on the assimilating, normalizing, and mainstreaming aspects of queer representations, as well as their relationship to commodification and political economy (Burgess, 2008, 213; Peters, 2006, 12). Scholars focus on how gender, racialization and class play into which queer identities are represented, and how these privileged queer identities become synonymous

with queerness (Peters, 2006, 12). In terms of representations of queer women, Susan Driver explains that “the very conditions of visibility are prescribed by class, race, gender and age norms according to which viewers come to see and recognize what a lesbian looks and acts like” (2007, 58), noting that the creation of normalized queer identities have consequences that extend beyond their simple visibility. This normalization of queer identities is also referred to as assimilationist attitudes towards representation, and these assimilationist attitudes are defined by television scholar Rebecca Beirne as “attitudes that would closet the sexual aspects of sexuality in the name of integration...the commodification of homosexuality or the willingness to closet diversity” (2008b, 67). This attitude is contrasted with a ‘queerer’ attitude towards representation, one that does not attempt to make queer characters ‘just like’ their heterosexual counterparts but rather highlights their difference, their sexuality and showcases various queer identities. Assimilationist attitudes often play out as a privileging of white, upper-middle-class, gender conforming, able-bodied queer characters in monogamous and not-too-sexual relationships that aspire to normative institutions such as marriage, children and professional success (Beirne, 2008b, 44).

Television scholar Joshua Gamson states that, in regards to queer media representations, it is important to ask “who is invited, and by whom, and at what price, and with what political and social consequences” (quoted in Burgess, 2008, 213). As characters become more than simply their sexuality, with storylines that focus on their lives as entireties, particular forms of queerness becomes part of the normal, daily fabric of life. Glyn Davis argues that contemporary television shows “suggest that television is capable of making queerness ‘ordinary’, serial, mundane” (2004, 137), rather than original representations of queerness as solely a revelation or issue. Many debates take place over whether this is a positive development, or whether it tends to create an apolitical view of

queerness. Television scholars such as Davis (2004) argue for the importance of queerness being represented not as an ‘issue’ but as ‘normal’, whereas others, such as Burgess (2008), Peters (2006) and Sender (2012), call attention to the fact that the normalization of queerness entails commodification, as well as the creation of assimilated, acceptable queer identities and the subsequent marginalization of queernesses that are not adequately normative.

Queer television studies: Evaluative approaches

Similar to earlier critiques of the visibility/invisibility approach, queer television studies is brimming with criticisms of the “evaluative paradigm” of representation, or the focus on qualifying representations as positive or negative (Davis and Needham, 2009, 2). Glyn Davis and Gary Needham argue that queer television studies traditionally focuses too strongly on the supposed positive and negative aspects of individual shows, characters, and storylines, and that this approach pre-supposes an “agreed upon party line” (2009, 2), that everyone reads these narratives in the same way. Beirne similarly reminds us that making “a correlation between the often conflicting representations seen in a particular televisual text and the understanding a viewer will take from it” is not only unrealistic but naïve (2008b, 47), questioning the productiveness of a positive/negative approach. On the other hand, cultural studies approaches to media representations, such as those used by queer and feminist media scholars Eve Sedgwick and Paula Treichler, have developed approaches that nuance the positive/negative binary and allow for evaluative approaches to focus on the importance of these representations to larger cultural contexts (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1992). These evaluative approaches emphasize the cultural work done by media representations of queerness. Through her discussions of paranoid and reparative readings, Sedgwick explains that focusing on both positive and negative implications of a cultural text allows us to fully appreciate the possible connections to, and effects on, the particular society

in which the representation is produced and consumed (2003). She argues that it is not enough to simply point out the effects of homophobia in cultural texts; rather, we should seek to 'repair' these effects as well (Sedgwick, 2003). Contemporary queer television scholar Martin Zeller-Jacques likewise argues that it is "imperative to examine particular trends in representation and situate these within the wider mediated culture" (2011, 103). Wendy Peters' research on *Queer as Folk* (US) does exactly this, analyzing race, gender, class and queerness in relation to the political economy of production, the normalization of white, male, middle class queerness and viewers' responses to these representations (2006).

US Vice-President Joe Biden's recent assertion that the television show "Will and Grace probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody's ever done so far" in terms of queerness, as well as his endorsement of gay marriage, demonstrates the effects of queer representation on television on contemporary US cultural norms (quoted in Doyle, 2012). A *Christian Post* article begrudgingly analyzes recent political sways towards the support of gay marriage, discussing the importance of pop culture, including television, in changing socio-cultural norms. The author argues that "we should never forget that contending for marriage...requires an appeal to people's imaginations" and reluctantly acknowledges the success of the producers of queer televisual representations in changing their audience's views on gay marriage (Metaxas, 2012). Of course, it is important to note the normative nature of gay marriage, and question which queer identities, and which queer rights stand to gain from pop culture representations. Christopher Shelley, speaking to increased media visibility of transpeople, addresses the paradox of visibility for trans* identities:

On the one hand, vital information about transpeople's lives and the possibility of medical help and treatment are conveyed through various media. For many trans and

non-trans people alike, this is the primary source of education and colloquial knowledge about trans issues. On the other hand, popular culture has portrayed the trans body in sensationalistic and exploitative forms. When the media depicts transpeople, they influence and affect common attitudes toward them. (2008, 133 quoted in Heinz, 2012, 327)

Though this assertion may appear obvious, when coupled with the recognition that media, is, in fact, one of the only societal institutions that provides education on gender identity (elementary and secondary curricula, for example, rarely address trans* experiences or gender identity), the productive possibilities, or even necessity, of evaluating these representations becomes clear. While media visibility does not in and of itself reduce discrimination and violence towards transpeople, scholars theorize that “a successful transgender human rights strategy must find ways to enlarge the public imagination regarding the lives and aspirations of transpeople” (Currah, Juang and Price Minter, 2006, 312 quoted in Heinz, 2012, 341), echoing discussions surrounding the productive effects of queer televisual representation on changing norms. To be productive, a critical evaluative approach to studying queer televisual representations should be open to reading more than one discourse surrounding queerness in a single text, understanding that audiences will interpret representations in different ways. This approach should also examine what is new or different in a representation as compared to previous representations of queer and trans* identities, as well as pay attention to normalizing and commodifying possibilities of representations on queer and trans* identities. In this way, a critical evaluative approach to studying representations should stem from an understanding of the place of these representations relative to cultural norms, that is, both possibly harmful and also helpful.

Queer women on television

To further understand the role of normalization of queer identities in relation to analyzing queer televisual representations, in this next section, I will now turn to key themes in representations of queer women and transpeople specifically, as well as how racialization plays into the representation of these particular queer identities. Queer women have appeared on television in relatively smaller numbers than gay men (Beirne, 2008a; Burgess, 2008). The less frequent a representation of a certain identity, the more significant the few representations that exist become, and the more important it is to identify patterns and reused tropes that become synonymous with this identity in popular imagination (Beirne, 2008, 2). Common tropes associated with queer women include villains, victims, comic relief, desexualisation (historically) or hypersexualisation (in contemporary representations such as *The L Word*), and lack of diversity in terms of class status or racialization, domesticity and apoliticality (Beirne, 2008a, 4; Burgess, 2008, 216; Peters, 2006, 7; Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 211; Zeller-Jacques, 2011, 104). Storylines featuring adult queer women often centre on the family, with weddings, pregnancy and children taking centre stage, constraining queer female identities to a domestic context (Beirne, 2008b, 44). Queer women have also historically been relegated to secondary characters and fleeting storylines, if not subtext (Beirne, 2008a, 4). Using the example of the teenage lesbian storyline between Marissa and Alex on the 2004-2005 season of *The OC*, Burgess illustrates the use of many of these tropes, both positive and negative (2008, 211). She lists positive tropes associated with queer women, including queer relationships that are portrayed in a similar way to straight relationships, i.e. featuring both romance and sexual desire, acceptance by friends and family, portrayals of sexual fluidity and a general nuance in the storyline and character development. Negative tropes include excessive internalized homophobia, oversexualized or

exploitative depictions, queerness as promiscuity or instability, queerness as a phase, experimentation or rebellion, queerness fantasized about by or performed for straight male characters and queer relationships as reaffirming heterosexuality (Burgess, 2008, 216). Certainly, these tropes are neither entirely positive nor entirely negative, as people interact with these characters and storylines in very different ways. However, it is necessary to understand how queer women and girls have been portrayed traditionally in order to analyze contemporary representations of queer girls.

It would be impossible to speak of queer women on television without at least a passing reference to the now ubiquitous show *The L Word*, Showtime's 2004-2009 series centering on the lives of a group of queer women living in Los Angeles. As a result of being the first television show with a cast of almost exclusively queer women, the show simultaneously garnered intense praise and intense criticism (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 211). A brief discussion of the critiques and praises of *The L Word* by lesbian audiences provides a useful summary of the mainstreaming and normalizing of lesbian identities on television. Critics cite the lack of diversity of lesbian identities represented, namely the prevalence of white, feminine, thin and able-bodied characters, a noticeable lack of racial diversity and butch or masculine presenting characters, and a "pandering to the male, heterosexual gaze" (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 211). In other words, normalized lesbian identities become whiter, more feminine and exist within conventional beauty norms. These normalized lesbian identities, however, are celebrated by others who are pleased to see the disappearance of 'negative' caricatures of lesbians as masculine, 'unattractive' and one dimensional that previously informed society's view of lesbian bodies (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 212). The idea that queer women are, in fact, 'just like them', meaning just like straight women, with the exception of their sexuality is a welcome representation to

some queer audiences. Wolfe and Roripaugh summarize this affective relationship lesbian viewers have to *The L Word* as the “policing of commodified mainstream image making vs. policing of negative stereotypes” (2008, 212), reminding us that identity, representation and the capitalist nature of television production are always entwined. Though queer girls may become normalized in ways that are slightly different than queer women, they also exist within this same tension between normalization, representation and the diversity of queer identities.

Trans representation on television*

Many of the traditions and debates explored surrounding visibility and normalization, as well as the historical tropes listed, apply particularly to more privileged queer identities, such as white, middle class gay men and lesbians, and different theoretical approaches are needed to analyze representations of trans* characters. All too often, due to a myriad of factors stemming from the omnipresence of gender norms in our lives, gender identity is often conflated with sexuality. Frequently, people whose gender expression, presentation or identity “are disruptive to gender normativity [are] immediately assumed to be gay, lesbian or queer” (Kern, 2012, 243), without any of knowledge of their actual identification in terms of sexuality. This conflation of gender identity with sexuality leads to a conflation of trans* identity with queer identity. This is complicated by the fact that queer is often used as an umbrella term that includes trans* among the various identities it covers. When used in this way, queer is generally understood to mean all “non-normative sexual and gender identities” (Kern, 2012, 242). However, both conceptually and in practice, a sexual identity is not the same as a gender identity. Susan Stryker emphasizes that transgender is not a sexual orientation and that we need to be careful when using the label ‘queer’ in order to not further marginalize transpeople from queer and mainstream communities (2008, 138). Transpeople

are certainly not universally accepted in queer communities or by queer people and can be isolated from both heterosexual and queer communities (Kern, 2012, 254). The recognition of gender identity and sexuality as distinct, and queer and trans* as separate identities is integral to this thesis. This does not mean, however, that pop cultural representations of trans* identities have necessarily succeeded in maintaining this distinction.

Historically, trans* representations on television have been largely nonexistent, with the exception of thrillers and crime shows, and occasional appearances in sitcoms and medical dramas. These representations are usually of transwomen; historically, there has been a general lack of representations of transmen in any pop culture medium (Phillips, 2006, 138). In *Transgender on Screen (2006)*, John Phillips looks at popular mainstream films with trans characters and argues that the central motif in trans representation is the “structure of disguise/deception and unveiling/revelation” (2006, 18), whereby the revealed gender identity becomes the character’s ‘true’ gender. Sexual eroticization and name-change often play important roles in both the deception and revelation stages of these representations, though eroticization is more common in representations of transwomen than transmen (Phillips, 2006, 30). Phillips analyzes *Boys Don’t Cry*, a mainstream film with a trans main character and demonstrates that once the character Brandon is revealed to be transgender, the film moves to portray him and his partner as lesbians, and there is a denial of transgender and male as his real gender identity. Other themes include violence, discrimination, Othering, and ultimately, death (Phillips, 2006, 140). In contrast, Matthew Heinz’s discourse analysis of blogs written by transmen revealed overarching themes of pathology, sex/gender minority, masculinity/manhood, normalcy and culture, demonstrating the “potential disconnection between cultural representation and everyday trans lives” (2012, 335). Media representations of transpeople, as with any community, are not necessarily

realistic portrayals of trans* experiences, but this is particularly notable when the representations of trans* experiences are few and far between.

In terms of television specifically, there have been very few representations of transmasculine characters to begin with, and as result, the existing literature is small. Adam Torres from *Degrassi*, is, after all, the first trans main character on any television show. *The L Word* did provide two brief representations of transmasculinity in the characters of Max and Ivan: Max was a main character who identified as a transman and began transitioning through the use of hormone therapy, though his gender identity was not always respected by other characters; Ivan was a minor character in the first two seasons who presented as a man and dated straight women, though his gender identity was not explicitly confirmed (Kern, 2012, 241). The characters of Max and Ivan received much criticism as to the intent behind their inclusion and their portrayal of transmasculinity. For instance, Beirne argues that “[Ivan] appears to have been included more as a gender-bending sideshow than a serious attempt to engage in discussion of diverse or multiple gender (and sexual) identities” (2008b, 121). Recognizing that it is inherently problematic to privilege certain trans* representations – and therefore identities – as more authentically trans* than others, many have nonetheless pointed to the fact that the characters of Max and Ivan do not represent the diversity of transmasculine experiences.

Through group interviews conducted with cisgender *L Word* audiences, Rebecca Kern demonstrates that transmasculine characters on television are not well-received or understood, even from viewers who claimed to understand transgender identities, gender transitioning and were pleased to see ‘progressive’ storylines shown (2012, 242). Their reactions to Max and Ivan included the use of female pronouns in reference to the transmasculine characters, and generally demonstrated “shock, confusion, or otherwise

disagreement about the concept of gender as a fluid identification” (Kern, 2012, 254). The only transmasculine-identified audience member interviewed, on the other hand, appreciated the existence of the characters in the first place, found many of the scenes, such as bathroom harassment, to be realistic, and believed these storylines could create new possibilities for teaching gender and sexuality (Kern, 2012, 247). Many of the viewers who expressed the aforementioned negative views of transmasculinity identified as queer women, and Kern’s study found that “regardless of the sexual self-identification of the viewer, deviation from gender norms by characters on the show created anxiety, and even homosexual/queer identified viewers projected normative ideals of gender onto characters” (2012, 242). Clearly, when researching transgender representations, it is imperative to recognize cisgender privilege and the ways in which queerness coexists with this privilege. Analyses of transgender representations must be framed within the recognition of the existence and presence of transphobia within society (Stryker, 2008).

While the argument can be made for a “post-lesbian space”¹¹ on certain television shows, no such post-trans* space can exist for transgender representations. The normalization of trans* identities for mainstream audiences, however, similar to the normalization of queer identities, may become a reality as trans* characters begin to appear as main characters on television. Kern hypothesizes that “the production of a more normative transgender or gender variant character – one that is less threatening and through self-expressive gendered practice maintains the male/female binary” could be expected for future television shows (2012, 245), in a similar way that the maintenance of normative sexual binaries can be said of normalized queer characters. Sally Hines similarly speaks to the

¹¹ The concept of a “post-lesbian space” is articulated by Zeller-Jacques in “Challenging and Alternative: Screening Queer Girls on Channel 4” and will be discussed further in this section.

“homogenization of trans identity(ies)”, and the idea that there is only one way to be trans, and that this one way is the ‘right way’ to be trans (quoted in Kern, 2012, 251). Analyses of trans* representations on television should therefore be aware of normative and mainstreaming possibilities in future representations. Speaking to transmasculine discourse on blogs written by transmen, Heinz notes the normative possibilities of a trend of “presenting one’s trans identity or trans history as a to-be-acknowledged part of one’s life, but not all of one’s life” (2012, 336), echoing much of the discourse surrounding representation of other marginalized communities. Recently, Cael Keegan has theorized the existence of “an emerging transnormative subject position” in Western visual culture as exemplified by transgender characters Adam on *Degrassi* and Bree in the film *Transamerica* (2013, 3). In Keegan’s formulation, transnormativity “[implies] that transgender difference is ultimately resolvable” through the successful existence of trans characters within other normative structures, such as heteronormativity and the gender binary (2013, 28). As potentially normative transgender characters begin to appear in mainstream media, the intersectional nature of identity must also remain central to analyses of trans identities, studying the intersections of classism, racism, sexism and ableism with gender identity (Heinz, 2012, 337).

This thesis will use Stryker’s definition of transgender as “the movement across a socially imposed boundary from an unchosen starting point” as well as “gender-variant practices and identities” as a theoretical framework and starting point for analyzing transgender representations (2008, 19). However, in order to acknowledge the character of Adam’s clear identification with a specific gender, Stryker’s specification of transgender as also meaning “those who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth” will be used in analyzing the character of Adam (2008, 19). Transmasculinity will be

therefore be used as a theoretical framework for this analysis, with an emphasis on the separation of gender identity from sexuality.

Queer and trans characters and the erasure of racialization*

In terms of the racialization of queer and trans* characters, many television scholars note their overwhelming whiteness. As queer identities are normalized for consumption by mainstream audiences, this often entails a whitening of queer identities that results in the vast majority of queer characters on television being white (Beirne, 2008b; Peters, 2006; Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008). Peters argues that television often “[positions] White gay and lesbians as virtual stand-ins for all gays and lesbians”, and queer people of colour, when represented, are in “supporting, exotic, erotic, comic or silent roles” (2006, 124). Queer people of colour on television are generally not represented – and therefore invisible – or are ‘Othered’ in ways that uphold whiteness as inherent to mainstream queerness. Adding gender presentation and gender identity to the discussion around racialization and queerness allows for another complex set of representational issues. In her foundational text on cultural representations of lesbians in the 1990s, Ann Ciasullo offers a convincing analysis of the way that consumable (and therefore represented) lesbian bodies are not only femme, but also white, leading to the “conflation of femmeness and whiteness in [these] images” (2001, 596). She demonstrates how the very few existing representations of queer women of colour are butch lesbians, in stark contrast to the culturally accepted “white (hetero) sexualized femme lesbian” (Ciasullo, 2001, 597). This argument remains largely true in more contemporary television shows as well, such as *The L Word* and *The Wire*. Helen Fenwick, while discussing contemporary representations of butchness, explains that the black butch lesbian is the version of female masculinity that is least threatening to white male masculinity (2011, 92). This, she contends, explains the tendency to portray butch lesbians as black (such as Tasha on *The L Word*, and

Kima and Snoop on *The Wire*), and trans* men as white (such as Ivan and Max on *The L Word*). The connections between racialization, gender identity and visible queerness are extremely complex, however, it is essential to recognize that trans* characters are almost always white on television, and representations of racialized queer characters remain rare. As this section has demonstrated, various queer and trans* identities have different televisual representational histories, and as a result, for example, approaches to analyzing racialized queer women should differ from those for analyzing white transmen. Critical analyses of queer representations on television should be rooted in the representational histories and tropes associated with the specific queer or trans* identity being represented.

Queer and trans youth on teen television*

I would now like to turn our attention to youth representation specifically and review the key themes in representations of queer and trans* youth on television. In this next section, I will firstly examine the production of teen television and how this affects the predominance of positive representations of queer youth in the teen television genre. I will then proceed to a discussion of the apolitical nature of queer youth storylines and its links with the genre's emphasis on the coming out scene. Finally, I will return to our previous discussion on evaluative approaches to studying queer televisual representations as they pertain to youth specifically.

The relationship of producers and consumers in teen television differs from adult television shows in that teen shows are created by adults, with a particular agenda in mind: "to educate and inform while entertaining...; to set certain agendas at this delicate time just prior to the onset of a more prominent citizenship; and/or raise crucial issues (of adult choosing) in a 'responsible manner' that is entirely hegemonically negotiated" (Davis and Dickinson, 2004, 3). Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson argue that the most crucial element

structuring television is that of consumerism, and therefore teen television must be analyzed within this structure that posits the teen as consumer. This model of the teen as consumer leads to an analysis of teenagers as in between childhood and adulthood enjoying various freedoms and limitations; at a critical point in their lives when they are maturing, molding, shaping themselves and their worlds (Davis and Dickinson, 2004, 10). However, critical youth scholars might argue against this uncritical view of youth as perfect neoliberal subjects and instead argue that youth have considerable agency over their own subjectivities. Recent youth studies research will point out that youth do not simply passively consume media, instead, they actively engage in the creation, consumption and analysis of cultural texts, through, for example writing fan fiction about their favourite television characters or analyzing television storylines on online discussion forums (Driver, 2006, 12). Of course, regardless of youths' ability to critically engage with these cultural texts, it remains true that mainstream television shows are written, developed and produced by adults with a particular agenda in mind. In terms of representations of minority youth on television, this goal is often to discuss the "social treatment of others" while also providing a space for minority youth to see themselves represented in this media platform (Davis and Dickinson, 2004, 10). Various power and privilege differentials between those who create these cultural texts and those who consume and engage with them should be taken into account when analyzing representations of diverse youth identities on television.

Queer and trans youth on teen television: Positive representations only, please*

Queer television scholars will also point out that representations of queer teens on television are almost exclusively positive, in contrast to representations of adult queerness and certainly adult trans* characters (Berridge, 2012; Davis, 2004; Driver, 2007). The representational norm for queer youth on television is that of an out, well-adjusted character

whose identity, though possibly unstable or in flux, fits within established frameworks for queerness – bisexual, gay, experimentation – and is an otherwise likeable, accepted character (Driver, 2007, 58). In the rare exception where this is not the case, the character's shortfalls are explained by internalized homophobia, leading to depression, self-abuse or outward acts of sexism and/or homophobia, all of which are resolved when the character eventually reveals their "true self" and become a sympathetic, understanding character (Berridge, 2012, 318). This trend of positive representations is partially due to the educational agenda of many television shows aimed at teens, allowing these characters to become role models for queer teens as well as a vehicle for a particular political message, generally of tolerance and acceptance of minority identities (Davis, 2004, 134). Thus, teens are provided with a forum to learn about queerness that is not necessarily available elsewhere, and could address, for example, the lack of queer curricula in education systems (Davis, 2004, 134). Queer youth characters are seen as role models for queer youth in a way that adult queer characters are not expected to be, and this also partially accounts for the desire for positive representations (Driver, 2007, 59). However, there can also be negative implications of depicting teen queerness as overwhelmingly positive in that queer teens can be validated by recognizing their struggles and realities on television as well. Not all queer teens have happy endings with completely accepting families and friends, and an argument can be made for the importance of portraying a diversity of queer characters, storylines and experiences on television. The *It Gets Better* Campaign, a video campaign which grew out of the increased media coverage of queer youth suicides in the fall of 2010, similarly targeted queer youth with an overwhelmingly positive message, encouraging hope and perseverance through climates of hate and bullying (Savage, 2013). While acknowledging the positive potential of the campaign in terms of queer visibility and mass public outreach to queer youth, many

critics were quick to point out that the campaign privileged a neoliberal version of success that was predicated on a white, male, middle-class, cisgender identity. Jasbir Puar puts forward the critique that “queer people of colour, trans, genderqueer and gender nonconforming youth, and lesbians have not been inspirationally hailed by IGB in the same way as white gay male liberals”, and argues that the *It Gets Better* campaign’s “narrow version” of queerness can be more harmful than helpful to a diversity of queer youth (Puar, 2010). Puar’s argument can be extended to pop cultural representations of queerness in youth more broadly, and asks us to pay close attention to the connections between representations of various queer youth identities and their imagined possible life trajectories.

Queer and trans youth on teen television: Apoliticality and individualization*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, representations of queer teens on television portrayed queerness mostly as a revelation, and/or as a social and political issue, with the revelation coming in the form of a much hyped coming out scene in which the queerness of one character is revealed (Davis, 2004, 129). In teen television shows such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1994), *Dawson’s Creek* (1999), and *One Tree Hill* (2004), coming out scenes directed at peers generally resulted in acceptance after brief moments of surprise or confusion; while those directed at family were often met with initial rejection and disbelief, but culminating in eventual acceptance as well (Berridge, 2012, 317). These scenes were often denoted by difficult, personal emotional confessions; dramatic audio and visual effects, such as close up shots of characters’ pained faces; and an emphasis on the reaction of the heterosexual core character to whom this is revealed (Berridge, 2012, 317). Television scholars worried that this approach individualizes queerness, turning queerness into the identity struggle of a particular character without allowing for “any wider examinations of systemic social and cultural homophobia, of institutionalized inequalities and differentials of

power” (Davis, 2004, 129). The individualization of queerness is in part attributed to the medium itself – television generally focuses on individual characters and storylines, not wider sociopolitical context – as well as the fact that the earliest queer teens were not main characters.

However, television scholar Martin Zeller-Jacques argues that apolitical representations remain the norm in contemporary television shows, even with main queer characters and storylines that go beyond the coming out scene. Zeller-Jacques maintains that on two recent UK teen shows with queer girls as main characters, *Sugar Rush* and *Skins* (UK), representations of teen lesbianism “ [stop] short of representing the desire for equal treatment, for social status, for alternative ways of living, and implicitly equates lesbian identity to lesbian sex” (2011, 107). He further argues that this approach creates a “post-lesbian” space where neoliberal ideas of personal, sexual choice posit queer girls as the exactly the same as their peers, excepting only their desire for women (2011, 108). Representations of queerness then become constrained within other normative structures, such as those of monogamy, family, friendship and femininity. In turn, these representations produce a version of acceptable queerness in teen girls that is gender normative, generally white and middle class and therefore erases other queer girl identities. This concept of “post-lesbianism” is also theorized as a similar refusal of lesbian identity in favour of being seen as ‘just like them’, and even seeing the commodification of lesbian identities as having “subversive potential” in terms of acceptance and celebration of lesbian identities (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008, 213).

Normalized teen queerness is also created on television through contrast and comparison. Theorized as “normalization through juxtaposition”, this strategy entails a queer character or storyline that, in comparison with the sexual practices, relationships and/or

lifestyles of other characters, fits within normative structures and allows the character to be read as a healthy, realized (neoliberal) subject (Zeller-Jacques, 2011, 11). This comparison can be made to other queer or non-queer characters. An example of this strategy is the teenage lesbian relationship in *Sugar Rush*. Although the queer girls are shown engaging in sexual acts, they are normalized through comparison to non-monogamous parents who attend ‘swinger’ events, a straight best friend who has many sexual relationships and a brother who wears women’s clothes (Zeller-Jacques, 2011, 11). Normalization of queerness can also be achieved by showing teenage lesbian couples engaging in less physical affection, touching or sexual acts than their heterosexual peers. This strategy allows their relationships to seem more innocent, desexualizes the characters and shows their relationship as a romantic friendship rather than a sexual one, as was the case in mid-2000s teenage lesbian storylines on North American shows such as *Buffy*, *South of Nowhere* and *Degrassi* (Beirne, 2008b, 42; Driver, 2007, 77).¹²

Queer and trans youth on teen television: The coming out scene*

In her structural analysis of the genre of teen television from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s, Berridge analyzes the revelatory coming out scene not as an “isolated moment” (2012, 315), but in relation to the wider “narrative series structure” of teen television and discerns how the coming out narrative functions in the genre more broadly (Berridge, 2012, 315). She discovers that “the disclosure of homosexuality functions as a narrative end point, suggesting that ‘coming out’ was the problem for the homosexual character rather than widespread homophobia” (Berridge, 2012, 313), focusing on the need for action within the

¹² Driver notes that in the case of *Buffy*, less physical and sexual affection was shown between the show’s teenage lesbian couple, Willow and Tara, due to WB network regulations. Similarly, physical affection between queer girls on television was simply unheard of (and would have likely resulted in the loss of advertisers) in the early 2000s, and earlier representations of queer teenage relationships must be understood in this context.

individual character and not society at large. Drawing on Glyn Davis' (2004) and Bonnie Dow's (2001) work on the coming out scene as contributing to an individualized notion of teenage queerness in teen television, Berridge argues that this 'coming out' is preceded by, and frequently caused by, homophobic abuse (2012, 32). This narrative structure amounts to a denial of the seriousness of the homophobic abuse itself, often completely ignoring the perpetrator(s) of the abuse in both the coming out scene and the overall narrative (Berridge, 2012, 321). The coming out narrative is often framed in ways that privilege other (heterosexual) characters' reactions, demonstrating different ideologies towards queerness, but culminating in the dominance of a socially liberal, 'accepting' perspective (Berridge, 2012, 320). The queer character also often disappears from the narrative after coming out, whether by being completely written off the show, or relegated to a more marginalized or secondary role. In this way, queer narratives are not always about queerness or even the queer character; they are often usurped by narratives of tolerance and acceptance that reinforces the superior morality of a main heterosexual character (Berridge, 2012, 321). These narratives strengthen individualized, apolitical representation of teen queerness that makes the "relationship between hegemonic constructions of gendered sexuality and violence invisible" (Berridge, 2012, 321), refuse to recognize homophobia and sexism as the dominant structures behind these narratives of homophobic abuse and instead focus on the abuse as a "personal problem" that is resolved by coming out (Berridge, 2012, 321). Not only do these narratives separate queer politics from queer identities, as discussed by Zeller-Jacques (2011), but they also deny the experiences of many queer youth who continue to face homophobic harassment, violence and abuse after their 'coming out', as well as suggest that 'coming out' is a singular, one time experience. Again, it is important to return to Puar's

critique of a “narrow version” of queerness that privileges certain queer youth experiences to the detriment and denial of many others (2010).

Queer and trans youth on teen television: Affect and evaluative approaches*

I would like to return to the evaluative paradigm, discussed earlier in relation to queer television studies, and consider this approach as it relates specifically queer teen television. Berridge argues that in teen television specifically, this tendency to evaluate characters and storylines in relation to their perceived stereotypical and/or transgressive aspects does not take into account the structure of teen television itself (2012, 314). This approach forces the researcher to “focus on isolated moments, characters and episodes, divorced from series and generic contexts” (2012, 315), which in turn ignores the fact that television has a serial narrative structure, with meta-narratives that span across seasons and even entire series. Here, she is drawing on Davis and Needham’s earlier work on the temporal structure of television and the inherent difficulty in incorporating queerness as anything other than an exception into a medium with such an expected, quotidian structure (2009, 7). Berridge asserts that beyond the temporal and narrative structure of television in general, teen television as a genre deals primarily with identities at a time when they are not yet fully formed or stable and the idea that one can evaluate whether these representations of identity are positive or negative for youth viewers is antithetical to the diversity of learning and growing experiences being depicted (2012, 314). She also references Driver’s research on youth as able to engage with texts in active ways and take different meanings and interpretations from a singular text (2012, 314). In short, teen television research should “interrogate how narrative and series structure affect the kinds of stories told about gendered sexuality and power” (Berridge, 2012, 313), rather than qualifying these stories as positive or negative.

I do see value in evaluating queer television narratives in relation to the dominant structures that shape them, though I agree with Berridge, Davis and other queer television scholars that there is no objective criteria for determining whether a representation is positive or negative, as well as with the fact that youth viewers will engage with these texts in a multitude of ways. Foucauldian understandings of the discursive nature of power, and the many feminist media studies approaches developed from this view of hegemonic power structures as maintained through discursive representations, demonstrate that pop cultural representations are not neutral. Televisual representations of queer youth are necessarily shaped by dominant gendered, racialized, sexualized and classed power structures. I would argue that this evaluative approach to studying queerness is useful, provided one is not evaluating the character or storyline itself, but evaluating how that character or storyline has been structured by racism, sexism or heteronormativity, for example. In this way, I am not interested in qualifying a representation as racist, sexist or homophobic, but I am interested in qualifying that representation as having been structured by racism, sexism or homophobia. This approach has been similarly applied to normalizing processes of queerness such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, commodification and commercialization (Burgess, 2008; Peters, 2006). I would argue that the growing trend in queer television scholarship to reject positive/negative evaluative approaches focuses on the structure of television show itself and neglects the dominant power structures that frame its production and reception. I believe it is equally important to continue to look at the kinds of stories that are enabled by societal structures of racism, sexism and homophobia, or, in the case of this research, homonormativity, rather than only “the [kinds] of stories about teenage sexuality and homophobic abuse that are enabled (or not) by this genre” (Berridge, 2012, 323). Representations of queerness are not only constrained by their medium or genre; they are

also constrained by the available discourses we have to imagine queerness in the first place. Many contemporary representations of teenage gender and sexuality, not simply televisual representations, neglect the place of these dominant power structures in their analyses.

The affective nature of television and its effects on youth specifically, also speak to the importance of a nuanced evaluative approach. Emphasizing both this affective nature, as well as youth's active relationship with television, Driver states that "a television show is not a self-contained text but a series of narratives and visual signs that seep into the daily praxis of queer youth cultures and subjectivity" (2007, 59). The queer characters shown on television affect queer youth viewers in a multitude of ways. Through emulation of aspects as seemingly trivial as their clothing style or as important as their self-confidence, through the writing of romantic queer fan fiction or through crushes on characters leading to a realization of queerness, these characters and storylines can positively affect the lives of queer youth. Through the internalizing of negative comments made by friends or family about these characters, or through feelings of comparative inadequacy, they can also have negative effects on the lived realities of queer youth. If we are to believe that "watching queer girls on television is not a trivial pursuit for youth struggling to find some semblance of public representation through which to make sense of their world" (Driver, 2007, 57), then we must also accord importance to the qualitative aspects of these representations, and understand that a positive or negative representation on television can have positive or negative effects on the lives of queer youth. As this section has demonstrated, analyzing representations of queer and trans* youth on teen television necessitates an approach that centers youth identities and the ways in which these identities are normalized, specifically, recognizing the differences between the producers and consumers of teen television, the

tropes in the genre itself – the coming out scene, family and friend relationships, and apoliticality – as well as the ways in which youth viewers engage with televisual texts.

Marketable and consumable representations

In order to further understand the processes of normalization of queer identities in mass media texts, this final section will more closely examine the links between the normalization and the commodification of identities. I will focus on how certain queer identities are marketed in mainstream media, including television, providing a review of the beginning of queer representation on television in relation to its neoliberal context. Finally, I will solidify the links between neoliberalism and queer identities through an elaboration of the theoretical frameworks of homonormativity and homonationalism.

Queer identities have generally become marketable enough to be represented in mainstream media in two very different ways: either by being adequately normalized or adequately perverse. Those queer identities that are not appropriately normalized or perverse enough are not seen as fit for representation, further marginalizing them. In her aforementioned study of cultural representations of the lesbian body during the 1990s, Ciasullo investigates how race, class and gender presentation affect which lesbian bodies and identities become marketable/consumable, making a strong case for processes of normalization as a prerequisite for representation (2001, 584). She finds that images of white, feminine, visibly middle or upper class lesbians were by far the most prevalent, and argues that these heterosexualized, de-homosexualized images are mainstreamed for a (straight, male) audience that will be able to identify with them due to their sameness (Ciasullo, 2001, 592). This sameness marks these identities as unthreatening, and unthreatening queer identities are therefore consumable (Ciasullo, 2001, 599). She cites the example of the butch body as unrepresentable since it “accommodates neither desire [straight

men] nor identification [straight women] for mainstream audiences” and is often marked with a lower socio-economic status and/or racialized (Ciasullo, 2001, 604). Only those lesbian identities without visible markers of difference or queerness were deemed worthy of representation, and the overarching discourse surrounding these images was the message that these lesbian identities are ‘just like us’. Referencing Sedgwick, Wolfe and Roripaugh explain that “television is a genre that ultimately caters to the desires and expectations of mainstream audiences” which accounts for the normalizing of marginalized identities on television (2008, 211). Burgess similarly argues strongly for the links between representation in television and normalization:

If there is something commercial about gay or queer, it is the heteronormalizing and mainstreaming of these identities and sexualities...anyone who exists beyond this heteronormative definition of sexuality is denied representation and visibility and is subjected to continued marginalization. (Burgess, 2008, 214)

In this way, we can understand normalization – in this case, both in terms of heteronorms and homonorms – as one way in which queer identities become acceptable for representation to a mainstream audience.

Conversely, other queer identities are marketed through the concept of the ‘freak’. Critical disability studies can help us to understand the ways in which perversity is appropriated for consumption by mainstream audiences. Similarly to queerness, disability can be represented in many different ways, some normalizing, but also as “the exotic, which makes disability strange and distant – a freakish, or perhaps transgressive, spectacle” (McRuer, 2006, 171). This distance is assumed to be in relation to mainstream (able-bodied) audiences, and the appeal of this unknown difference that will reify their normativity is what makes these identities profitable in a neoliberal society. Eli Clare reminds us that the

relationship between representations of disability and capitalism has a long, rich history – people were making a profit from showcasing difference and disability at ‘freak shows’ as far back as the mid 1800s (2009). Queer and trans* bodies are also no stranger to being portrayed as perverse, as freakish or as spectacle. Original representations of queerness on television were as evil villains, comic relief at the spectacle of their very existence, or victims unable to survive due to their insurmountable difference (Peters, 2006). Perversity is consumable in that it reifies binaries between mainstream normativity and the abnormality of those who fall outside norms. However, most of the queer and trans* characters that have been represented as perverse or freakish through comic relief, villains and victims have been adult characters; additionally, they have been supporting characters with minimal roles, not main characters. As has been discussed, representations of queer and trans* youth on television are almost always positive – inherent in this positivity is a reconciliation between their difference and their sameness, often represented through similarities to and acceptance by peers. Representations of marginalized youth appear to follow slightly different rules in terms of normalization and freakishness than representations of queer and trans* adults. However, representational histories of queerness, both normalization and perversity – or tensions between them – should inform analyses of new and different representations of queer and trans* identities.

Neoliberal commodification of queerness

Building on these strategies for marketing queerness to mainstream audiences, I will now briefly focus on the political economy of production of television in order to further illustrate the commodification of queerness in televisual representations. Feminist approaches to studying televisual representations cite the need to consider the “wider frame of media practices” (Brunsdon and Spiegel, 2008, 11), including the network and channel that

air various television shows in terms of who owns these networks, their mandate or vision, and their target audiences. For example, “women’s networks” or “Black networks” will have a different vision and target audience than large mainstream networks and this can in turn affect the quantity of representations of marginalized identities and result in more main characters with marginalized identities, though not necessarily produce representations that differ considerably from those on mainstream networks (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, 11).

The creation of these alternative networks often takes place as an identity becomes commodified, or becomes constructed as a potentially untapped financial market within a neoliberal capitalist framework (Becker, 2006). For example, as queer – or in this case, mostly white gay male – identities became sought after as consumers, LOGO, a “gay network” was created with programming specific targeting white gay male identities (Beirne, 2008b, 43). Given that these networks are seen as specialty or niche networks and not included on basic cable packages, their “content is frequently only available to specific regional and socioeconomic groups” (Beirne, 2008b, 36), which only serves to reinforce the representational privileging of these same socioeconomic groups. Similar analyses can extend past the creation of individual networks or channels catering to particular identities and onto individual characters or storylines on television shows. Wolfe and Roripaugh explain the tensions between identity, representation and the capitalist reality of television in reference to *The L Word*, stating that “the show bears inordinate responsibilities and impossible representational burdens, particularly when it must perform competitively to ensure its continued existence” (2008, 218). Mainstreaming of queer identities in television is therefore closely tied to processes of commodification.

A more in-depth exploration of the processes by which queer identities become commodified requires an examination of the particulars of television production during the

advent of queer televisual representation, the 1990s, beginning with the ultimate goal of television production – advertising revenues. At its most basic, the foremost desire of television networks to achieve financial gains cannot be separated from the production of television shows. It is often assumed that since television makes its profits through advertising, advertisers “have the most control over content” (Vargas, 2010, 32). It follows that television will therefore stay “away from controversial or strong content” that would put off viewers and have a negative impact on advertising revenues (Vargas, 2010, 30). Certainly, many media scholars are quick to note the centrality of advertising in the world of television. Driver notes that television is an “institutionalized medium” that exists within the neoliberal parameters of all mass media genres (2007, 57). In *Gay TV and Straight America*, his comprehensive analysis of the political, cultural and economic climates that lead to the surge in gay programming on US television in the 1990s, Ron Becker similarly emphasizes the “economic imperatives of an advertising-based medium” (2006, 108), though he points out many nuances in the relationship between television networks and advertising. For example, he explains that it is not necessarily the advertisers themselves that directly control content; rather it is also the – real or imagined – wishes of their target audiences.

In order to understand how gay programming¹³, thought of as risky and controversial, began to see the light of day on television, one must begin with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s. By the 1990s, “niche marketing” or target marketing, wherein reaching particular demographics is achieved through increasingly personalized ads, had become the status quo for television advertisers (Becker, 2006, 83). Additionally, the three main US networks (CBS, ABC, NBC) had lost their previous monopoly on television advertising revenues, due

¹³ I use the term ‘gay’ in this section, rather than my usual ‘queer’, to reflect both Becker’s language and the reality that much of the queer material on television in the 1990s was white gay men and a few white lesbians.

in part to the rise of cable and independent broadcasting that appealed to younger viewers, such as MTV and Fox (Becker, 2006, 88). By the middle of the decade, target audiences had changed from older audiences and families to the 18-49 urban, liberal demographic, and these main networks sought to reach this demographic through “sex, nudity, violence, risqué language and cutting edge visual style” in order to create an ‘edgy’ image (Becker, 2006, 98). Hence the advent of gay material – inherently edgy, it fit perfectly within this strategy, and by 1996, there were 33 gay characters on US prime-time television, compared to zero in 1991 (Becker, 2006, 104).

Of course, the effect of neoliberalism on gay programming is much more complex than networks trying to reach younger, socially liberal demographics in order to stay relevant in a competitive marketplace. Acceptance of gay identities and the promotion of gay rights from economically privileged, socially liberal straight adults allowed them to embrace two main tenets of neoliberalism – social liberalism and fiscal conservatism (Becker, 2006, 108). Becker elaborates that “being socially liberal and fiscally conservative, one could synthesize multicultural discourses that celebrated diversity and neoliberal discourses that celebrated the free market” (2006, 122), and gay rights provided a socially progressive cause to support that did not entail a redistribution of wealth or directly challenge established economic structures. Simultaneously, mainstream gay activism was becoming increasingly compatible with neoliberalism, as radical queer activism gave way to a focus on acceptance into mainstream institutions for an economically privileged white gay elite (Duggan, 2003, 45). As the privileged gay elite became synonymous with the gay population more broadly, the advertising industry saw “the construction of affluent gay consumers in market research and reports” (Becker, 2006, 124), reports detailing that gay populations were a previously untapped market with much disposable income and high brand loyalty. Suddenly, gay

programming could be used not only to attract the aforementioned socially liberal straight demographic but also the newly attractive gay demographic. Becker names this particular neoliberal phenomenon “the affordable politics of gay chic” (2006, 129), succinctly identifying the mutual cooptation of neoliberalism with mainstream gay identities as well as its appeal to television advertisers.

Unsurprisingly, gay programming on television reflected this imagined homogeneous gay population – most gay characters during this time period were white, upper-middle class gay men, and, to a lesser extent, lesbians. Consistent with this mainstreaming of gay identities, these representations were desexualized and depoliticized – no intimacy or physical affection was shown between gay characters (Vargas, 2010, 12). Additionally, not only were gay characters overwhelmingly white, the rise of gay characters on television coincided with a decrease in racialized characters in the late 1990s (Becker, 2006, 133). Becker argues that this can be understood in relation to the relative compliance of gay affluence with neoliberal politics compared to the uneasiness caused by racialized poverty (2006, 133). In this way, rights for racialized people are necessarily linked to economic redistribution whereas (white) gay rights fit comfortably within the safer sphere of cultural issues (Becker, 2006, 133).¹⁴ This reminder that political economy functions through, and depends upon, “racial, gendered and sexual hierarchies” is integral to understanding how marginalized identities become represented in mainstream media genres such as television (Duggan, 2003, 73). Economic policies – often confused with economic realities – must be connected to their socio-cultural objectives and effects: “neoliberalism is not a unitary ‘system’, but a complex, contradictory cultural and political project created within specific

¹⁴ This argument is not to deny the existence of racialized queer people. The imagined separation of queerness from racialization will be detailed by Jasbir Puar in the next section.

institutions, with an agenda for reshaping the everyday life of contemporary global capitalism” (Duggan, 2003, 73). In other words, the mainstreaming of queer identities, their commodification and their subsequent representation in mass media are intrinsically linked not only to advertising revenues but to the broader neoliberal project.

Homonormativity and homonationalism in media and politics

Furthering this exploration of the representational history of queerness on television in relation to the neoliberal project in the US, I will now finally detail the theoretical frameworks of homonormativity and homonationalism in order to emphasize the links between the normalization of queer identities in media and broader social, political and economic climates. The normalization and commodification of queerness in media and pop culture are inherently connected to similar normalizing tendencies in queer political activism and the gay rights movements. During the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s, Lisa Duggan notes that the face of queer political activism changed significantly – it became less inclusive of the diversity of queer populations, less willing to position queer rights alongside economic and racial justice, more willing to embrace lifestyles based in consumption and privatisation, and much less critical of mainstream political, economic and social institutions (2003, 44). She argues that by the mid-1990s, this new version of the gay rights movement had begun to achieve its goals, that “greater acceptance of the most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream portion of the gay population had already occurred – in politics, media representation, and the workplace” (2003, 44). Becker’s example of the inclusion of white, gay upper-middle class gay men and lesbian characters on prime-time television programming is but one example of this phenomenon (2006). National gay rights organizations began to focus on the priorities of the supposed affluent white gay elite, rather than the diversity of gay populations, a choice that was neither based in fact nor accidental

(Duggan, 2003, 45). Similar to the strategies adopted in order to appeal to television advertisers, these gay rights organizations constructed a “phantom mainstream public of ‘conventional’ gays” in order to appeal to (also phantom) mainstream politicians and oppose radical queer activists (Duggan, 2003, 50). This was an active choice on the part of privileged gay elites to push their own interests at the expense of the majority of the queer population who do not fit into this imagined ‘mainstream’ box.

Duggan first coined the term “homonormativity” to describe this appropriation of neoliberal US nationalism by the gay rights movement (2003, 50). She elaborates that homonormativity is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2003, 50). In other words, homonormative politics do not seek to deconstruct or change heteronormative institutions; rather, they seek to be included in them. The problem is not seen to be in the frameworks themselves, only in the fact that certain groups of people are excluded from them. As a result, homonormative politics center on gay marriage and the inclusion of gays in the military: inclusion in the institutions of marriage, the family and militarism become the key to equality and rights for queer people (Duggan, 2003, 50). A recent example of homonormative politics is US President Obama’s statement expressing his support for gay marriage, citing “members of [his] own staff who are in incredibly committed monogamous relationships, same-sex relationships, raising kids together...soldiers or airmen or Marines who are out there fighting on [his] behalf” and the celebratory response it has garnered from mainstream gay organizations and liberal news organizations (quoted in Stein, 2012). In this context, acceptable queerness – that which deserves recognition in media, politics and business – becomes queerness that already possesses the means to access and benefit from

institutions upon formal inclusion; queer bodies and identities that are otherwise advantaged by neoliberal ideologies, specifically, white, upper-middle class gay men. This sentiment is echoed by activist Dean Spade, describing contemporary gay political activism as the “restoration of white privilege and class privilege for the small minority of elite gay men and lesbians” (2009, 167). He elaborates that racialized queer people, economically disadvantaged queer people and gender non-conforming and transgender people are left out of this normative conception of queerness. Homonormative politics do not actively contest dominant racialized, classed and gendered institutions, and must be understood as part of “a broad, multi-issue neoliberal politics” (Duggan, 2003, 65), that affects all spheres of public life, including media and pop cultural representation.

In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, her examination of the role of queerness and racialization in the production of contemporary US nationalism, Jasbir Puar builds on Duggan’s concept of homonormativity in order to further specify what is recognized as acceptable queerness in the context of US nationalism through her concept of homonationalism. Homonationalist ideology allows for the inclusion of certain queer bodies and identities within US nationalism in order to produce a racialized Other that serves nationalist purposes related to the war on terror (2007, 39). Homonationalism disrupts dominant constructions of nationalism as necessarily heteronormative and emphasizes the racialized and classed hierarchies present within queer identities, as well as contemporary racist discourses within US nationalism. These dominant conceptions of nationalism are complicated by positing that “the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects” (Puar, 2007, 39). The queer bodies that are included in

nationalism do not lose their status as queer, rather it is their status as queer and included that produces productive members of the nation. Heterosexuality is not contested or deconstructed as a norm; however, it is shown to be flexible in its inclusion of certain non-threatening queernesses.

Puar emphasizes how homonormative politics are dependent upon racism, whether in casual rhetoric suggesting that white communities are more tolerant than communities of colour and immigrant communities, or through the complex complicity of white queerness with the war on terror (2007, 29). The nationalist projects for which these non-threatening queernesses are included are necessarily racialized, positing whiteness as central to homonationalism: “the project of whiteness is assisted and benefitted by homosexual populations that participate in the same identitarian and economic hegemonies as those hetero subjects complicit with this ascendancy” (2007, 31). The specific nationalist projects for which these acceptable, domesticated queer bodies are necessary is, in this case, the ‘war on terror’, and the production of a particular form of racialized Other, the perverse racialized terrorist, upon which this ‘war on terror’ can be waged (Puar, 2007, 76). As a result, acceptable queer bodies are those that are perceived as white and racialized bodies are perceived as heterosexual, creating a separation between racialized status and queerness (Puar, 2007, 44). Whiteness, or the ability to pass as white, becomes a criterion for acceptable queerness that is productive to US nationalism.

Puar summarizes that homonationalism is therefore useful to US nationalist projects by upholding heterosexuality as normative, by constructing normative queer identities within the framework of neoliberalism, by policing queer identities outside this homonorm, and by allowing “U.S. sexual exceptionalism”, which includes certain accepted queer identities, to then sexualize and racialize other nationalities in relation to homonormativity (Puar, 2007,

51). Homonationalism exists on a continuum with the dominant values of US nationalism, such as exceptionalism, histories of colonialism, and neoliberalism, and its version of acceptable queerness allow these dominant values to remain unchallenged: “nation, and its associations with modernity and racial and class hierarchies, becomes the defining factor in disaggregating between upright, domesticable queernesses that mimic and recenter liberal subjecthood, and out-of-control, untetherable queernesses” (Puar, 2007, 47), constructing a binary between white queerness and racialization as heterosexual. It is important to emphasize that homonationalism is a structure of modernity, not an individual quality or accusation. It should be used to analyze state practices, not to qualify an individual representation or practice. In this way, this theoretical framework will not be used to accuse a certain character or storyline of homonationalism; rather it will show that North American television (another structure of modernity) is amenable to homonormativity and homonationalism through the cultural texts of *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi*.

In this first chapter, I have detailed the theoretical foundations that will frame my analyses of *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi* by examining the representational histories of queer and trans* identities on television, focusing on the complex processes of normalization and commodification that determine which queer and trans* identities and experiences are represented. In elaborating common tropes and storylines associated with historical and contemporary televisual representations of queer women and girls, as well as transpeople, and with an emphasis on youth identities, I have set the stage for my analysis of new queer and trans* identities on television – racialized queer girls and white trans boys. The following chapters will analyze how these new representations of queer and trans* youth identities on television are structured by, as well as potentially disrupt, these processes of normalization and commodification in the televisual texts of *Pretty Little Liars* and *Degrassi*.

Chapter 2: ‘It Gets Better’: Homonormative trajectories on *Pretty Little Liars*

Introduction

Queer youth characters on contemporary teen television illustrate the social processes of normalization that remain present as queer youth become increasingly visible and diverse in mainstream media and provide insight into the relationship between diverse queer identities, normalization and commodification. Homonormativity, the process by which queerness is normalized through a successful existence within, and reinforcement of, dominant social structures of privilege, generally privileges white, male queer characters on television (Duggan, 2003; Sender, 2012; Beirne, 2008a). *Pretty Little Liars*’ Emily Fields represents an opportunity to understand how queerness continues to be normalized when it is portrayed by characters that are neither white nor male, in this case, a young, racialized female character. By analyzing not only Emily’s storyline, but also discussions surrounding her sexuality in online youth communities, it is possible to discern the meaningful cultural work done by normalized portrayals of youth queerness. In this case, Emily’s portrayal of youth queerness creates new frameworks for youth to engage with sexuality, specifically, a young, racialized, stable female queerness. *Pretty Little Liars*’ representation of youth queerness through the character of Emily Fields both adheres to and challenges structures of homonormativity and homonationalism. In this chapter, I will argue that Emily’s storyline represents an ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory – a homonormative trajectory of youth queerness that is reminiscent of the popular ‘It Gets Better’ video campaign. Emily follows a homonormative ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory through the eventual establishment of a stable queer identity: a queer identity that is easily labeled and exists within dominant heteronormative social structures, such as those of family and friendship. This stable queer

identity is accepted by her family and friends, substantiated by a queer history and follows an appropriate degree of internal struggle, bullying and familial troubles. Her homonormative trajectory is teleological – always moving forward toward the eventual end goal of queer happiness and success (Puar, 2007, 2). Emily also subverts this trajectory in important ways – such as through her racialization and her expression of political struggles related to her queerness – but ultimately, her trajectory remains representative of homonormativity.

This will be demonstrated by an examination of the political economy of production of *Pretty Little Liars* that will situate this analysis of Emily's character and storyline in the specific location in which it was produced – the world of Warner Bros. Television, ABC Family and creator and executive producer Marlene King. An analysis of Emily's coming out trajectory, focusing on moments of adherence to, and subversion of, homonormativity will detail what I have termed an 'It Gets Better' trajectory. Together with a brief analysis of comments made by youth in online *Pretty Little Liars* communities regarding Emily's storyline, this will allow for an understanding of the new societal frameworks for sexuality that are created by Emily's 'It Gets Better' trajectory, despite – or even due to – its amenability to homonormativity.

Pretty Little Liars' Political Economy of Production

Pretty Little Liars is original programming of ABC Family, a network which began as Robertson's Christian Broadcast Network in 1977, before eventually being sold to Disney in 2001 and renamed ABC Family (GLAAD, 2011b, 16). In 2006, the network underwent a revamping in order to better target young adults and youth, billing itself as ABC Family: A New Kind of Family with a renewed focus on original programming (GLAAD, 2011b, 16). The new ABC Family also saw an important increase in LGBT programming; as previously mentioned, during the 2010-2011, 55% of the network's programming hours were LGBT

inclusive, higher than any other network (GLAAD, 2011b, 16). ABC Family's LGBT inclusive programming is also diverse, with GLAAD finding them to be the "most balanced between lesbian, gay and bisexual" programming, though noting their lack of trans* representation (GLAAD, 2011b, 5). GLAAD believes there to be a "correlation between attracting [youth] demographics and creating inclusive programming" (GLAAD, 2011b, 5), accounting, in part, for the network's high level of LGBT programming. *Pretty Little Liars'* Canadian home, Much Music, similarly targets youth and young adult demographics, describing itself as the "No.1 Canadian brand for young adults" and focusing on music, celebrity and pop cultures (Much Music, 2013c).

Pretty Little Liars' Emily Fields would appear to have found a good home on ABC Family, a sentiment shared by creator and executive producer Marlene King. King explains that ABC Family is extremely supportive of Emily's character, saying that their team has "no limits on the sexuality" and that "even Peter Roth, the head of Warner Brothers Television, has taken a personal interest in this storyline" (Hogan, 2010c). On a more concrete level, when controversy erupted over General Mills and Re/max allegedly pulling their commercials from *Pretty Little Liars* due to its lesbian content, ABC Family's comment on the matter, though not specifically addressing queerness, demonstrated a commitment to inclusive programming: "We strive to reflect the rich diversity of our audience and the world around us. We're incredibly proud of the engaging characters and authentic storytelling that define ABC Family" (Kincaid, 2011), choosing to support Emily's portrayal of youth queerness.

The *Pretty Little Liars'* production team offers additional insight into the possibilities and constraints of Emily's world. The show is co-produced by Alloy Entertainment and Warner Horizon Television. Alloy Entertainment is a media, entertainment and book-

packaging company that specializes in young adult series, specifically those targeting teen girls (Alloy Entertainment, 2013). The company worked with Sara Sheppard to develop the book series and co-produce the show adapted from her novels (Alloy Entertainment, 2013). Alloy Entertainment is owned by Warner Bros. Television Group, itself part of Warner Bros. Entertainment, a subsidiary of international entertainment and media conglomerate Time Warner (Warner Brothers, 2013). Warner Horizon Television, the other co-producer of *Pretty Little Liars*, is also part of the Warner Bros. Television Group (Warner Brothers, 2013). Warner Horizon Television bills itself as “the leading producer of scripted series for the cable marketplace” (Warner Brother, 2013), cementing the fact that Emily’s world is very much created within mainstream media institutions.

The production team of *Pretty Little Liars* includes creator and executive producer Marlene King and executive producers Oliver Goldstick, Bob Levy and Leslie Morgenstein. Marlene King, often the voice of the *Pretty Little Liars* production team, is a queer-identified woman herself and often speaks to the sensitivity, seriousness and pride with which she approaches Emily’s character and storyline (Hogan, 2010c). She is also well known for interacting with fans on twitter, often posting photos that represent clues to the *Pretty Little Liars* mystery plot, taking their feedback into account and participating in fan conversations (Hogan, 2010c). As low percentages of women and racialized people in television writing and production continue to remain the norm – for the 2011-2012 season, the average percentage of women on the writing teams of television shows was 29.3% and the average percentage of racialized people was only 13% – many call attention to the fact that nuanced and sensitive portrayals of marginalized characters require members of marginalized communities to be involved in the creation of these characters (Writers Guild Association, 2013; Bernard, 2012a). *Pretty Little Liars*’ writing team includes three women out of a team

of seven, or 42.9%, and only one racialized person, at 14.3%, which, though higher than average, is surprising on a show with four teenage girls as main characters that is targeted at female teens and young women (Writers Guild Association, 2013). The specific location in which *Pretty Little Liars* is produced, though queer-friendly, remains structured by the limits of mainstream media institutions.

Homonormative trajectories in discursive representations of queer youth

In addition to detailing the specificities of the production of *Pretty Little Liars*, I will now further examine the concept of a homonormative trajectory as it relates to queer youth on television before proceeding to my critical discourse analysis of Emily's portrayal of youth queerness. Due to the serial narrative structure of television, and the emphasis on the 'coming out scene' within the genre, discursive representations of homonormativity in youth queerness on television can often be read through the coming out trajectory of queer characters – in other words, their storyline. Though there is no single version of a homonormative storyline, it is possible to determine certain aspects from the relevant literature on youth queerness on television as well as dominant media narratives of youth queerness, such as the *It Gets Better* campaign. The aforementioned video campaign started out as mainly adult queer people telling queer youth that life as a queer person will get better if you can just make it through the difficult high school years, though as it gained popularity many prominent straight adults, as well as other queer and straight youth, also contributed videos to the campaign. The message, however, remains fairly consistent throughout the over fifty thousand individual videos: you will surpass being bullied, feeling different, being unaccepted, feeling alone, and you will find love, a home, a family, professional success, happiness; in short, your life will look just like everyone else's (Savage, 2013). Of course, this normativity queer youth are being told they will achieve will be homonormative – that

is, they will still be queer, but they can mediate this queerness by seeking and gaining inclusion in heteronormative inclusions, such as marriage and the family, and achieving financial and professional success (Duggan, 2003). This version of homonormative success will be much more easily achieved if they already have, or have access to, white and/or middle class privilege, since the embodiment of acceptable queerness depends on an ability to exist within dominant heteronormative structures, as well as the ability to benefit from these structures upon inclusion (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2010). For example, images of financial and professional success privileged in the *It Gets Better* videos will be much more easily achieved by queer youth from upper-middle class families than youth from less economically privileged families. Queer youth are told they will inevitably achieve this success, however, especially if they live in the inclusive haven that is the United States, as evidenced by videos by US President Barack Obama and former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton (Savage, 2013). Both Obama and Clinton speak to the success of historical struggles for equality in the US and the important contributions queer people can make to US society: Obama explicitly states that queer youth can “make this country a better place” and Clinton expresses her gratitude “for the work of our LGBT employees who are serving the United States”, solidifying the link between homonormativity and US nation-building (Savage, 2013; Puar, 2007).

How could this idea that ‘It Gets Better’, this concept of a homonormative trajectory for queer youth to follow, play out on television in terms of the storylines of queer girl characters? Though there is no set list of the characteristics of a queer character and/or storyline that has been structured by homonormativity, possible characteristics and tropes can be discerned from the literature on homonormativity and queer youth on television as well as past iterations of queer youth storylines. Drawing upon the relevant literature and

theoretical frameworks presented in the previous chapter, I will enumerate the possible characteristics of a homonormative trajectory in queer girl storylines on teen television in order to theoretically ground my critical discourse analysis of Emily's portrayal of youth queerness. The character could be white, middle or upper-middle class, and gender conforming and/or conventionally feminine (Ciasullo, 2001; Peters, 2006; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Her queerness could be presented as an individual quality, apolitical, and not related to broader sociopolitical contexts (Berridge, 2012; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Her coming out could be presented as a singular, definitive experience that ultimately culminates in acceptance by friends and family (Berridge, 2012; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Her romantic relationships and expressions of desire could be desexualized and constrained within structures of monogamy and friendship (Beirne, 2008b; Driver, 2007; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). The character could be portrayed as likeable and accepted by her peers and all other characters – she might have no obvious 'flaws' other than her queerness (Driver, 2007). Her character might, after coming out, become and remain 'happy' (Ahmed, 2010). The character might be portrayed in such a way that she is, and desires to be, 'just like' her straight peers (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2008). A homonormative trajectory does not necessarily mean that the character would not experience bullying or rejection as a result of her queer identity, but it could suggest that these negative experiences can be resolved by the honest act of coming out (Berridge, 2012). Similarly, the character could struggle internally with her sexuality and be portrayed as sexually fluid for a certain amount of time – but this struggle could culminate in a stable identity, whether gay or straight (via a short experimental phase) (Driver, 2007). Her trajectory could always be moving forward in a particular direction – towards her end goal of out, queer happiness and success; in other words, the 'Better' in 'It Gets Better' (Puar, 2010). Ultimately, a homonormative trajectory would suggest that queerness will not be

painful or different forever – one can be both queer and accepted and move through life achieving the same milestones of success as one’s peers, provided, of course, one reaches (and desires to reach) these milestones.

I do not wish to conflate a homonormative – or an ‘It Gets Better’ – trajectory with homonationalism. In arguing that Emily’s storyline on *Pretty Little Liars* follows a homonormative trajectory reminiscent of the ‘It Gets Better’ concept, and occasionally subverting this trajectory, I will be analyzing key moments in which we can read discursive representations of homonationalism. The ‘It Gets Better’ message is neither inherently positive or negative: though telling queer youth that they need to achieve a certain type of normative success in order to be happy is not categorically helpful to all queer youth, neither is it categorically harmful (Puar, 2010). Reaching out to isolated queer youth, providing them with older queer role models, visibly showing them they are not alone, raising awareness about the existence of queer youth in the first place – these are all potentially helpful effects of the campaign. Homonationalism, on the other hand, is not simply this acceptance of certain normalized, productive, white queers into US nation-building; it is this acceptance for the purpose of the justification and continuation of neo-imperialist nationalist projects (Puar, 2007). ‘It Gets Better’ trajectories are amenable to homonationalism as they stem from the particular US sociopolitical context that created homonationalism; however, they are only one of many discursive representation of certain aspects of homonationalism, and certainly should not be understood as identical concepts. *Pretty Little Liars’* discursive representations of homonormativity and homonationalism, told through Emily’s storyline, will demonstrate one version of the telling of the ‘It Gets Better’ message.

Pretty Little Liars' *Emily Fields: A Critical Discourse Analysis*

My critical discourse analysis of Emily Fields' portrayal of youth queerness in *Pretty Little Liars* consisted of multiple readings of the televisual text which led to the emergence of key themes. During a first reading of the text, I watched Season 1 of *Pretty Little Liars* in its entirety, focusing on Emily's scenes, and noted three main aspects: dialogue, visual image (including the layout of the scene, actions and gestures) and sound (for example, background music). I transcribed the dialogue in Emily's scenes in full and noted the visual and sound aspects that accompanied key dialogue. I then coded my notes on Emily's scenes and identified five key themes: bullying, friendship, family, desire/romance and trajectory/temporality. I then returned to my notes and coded them a second time based on my five key themes, for example, I identified all of the episodes and scenes in which bullying was present. In doing so, I determined the frequency of each theme in Emily's scenes, but also their specific chronological locations. Lastly, I coded my notes a third time, looking for connections between the themes and returning to the televisual text when necessary, and the concept of 'It Gets Better' and a homonormative trajectory began to take form as an overarching theme of Emily's storyline. For example, I noted that the majority of the bullying scenes took place prior to Emily's coming out scenes, and the desire/romance scenes increased in frequency post-coming out. This led to my decision to organize my critical discourse analysis by chronological sections, rather than by key themes. As a result, my analysis is divided into four chronological sections: pre-coming out, coming out, post-coming out, and a final resolution section. I analyzed each theme within each section as they become relevant, and highlighted moments in which Emily's storylines adheres to, as well as subverts, this homonormative, 'It Gets Better' trajectory of youth queerness.

“Maybe I’m not the person everyone thinks I am”: Leading up to coming out

The pilot episode of *Pretty Little Liars* sets up Emily’s eventual coming out trajectory from the very beginning through the establishment of its main aspects: homophobic bullying; a traditional and racialized family; strong friendships; a queer romantic interest; and an existing, though hidden, queer history told through flashbacks, feelings of being an outsider and metaphors for sexuality. Emily is quickly shown to be a well-liked, kind character with a boyfriend, parental support, great friends, as well as being a star athlete, with her queerness as the piece of her identity that sets her apart. Emily’s racialization, though not explicitly discussed, also sets her apart visually from her white best friends and their families.

The opening scene of the pilot establishes Emily’s queerness through the use of flashback, a technique that the show uses frequently over the course of the season to portray Emily as acceptably queer: someone whose queerness has always been a part of her, someone whose identity as queer is stable even when it may appear to be fluid, someone who can easily fit into the ‘gay’ identity category. In the opening flashback, it is a year earlier and Emily tells her friends that she is “loving [Beyoncé’s] new video”, to which Alison responds “maybe a bit too much, Em” (Season 1, Episode 1: ‘The Pilot’). Emily’s face registers confusion; she stops smiling and pulls her knees up to her chest. Alison, meanwhile, is sitting much higher than Emily, looking down at her with a satisfied smirk. Emily’s queerness is therefore not only established as something to keep hidden, but also something for which it is possible to be bullied – for which others can gain control over you with their knowledge of this secret.

Two other scenes in the pilot foreground Emily’s coming out trajectory: one in which we meet her mother, and one in which we meet Maya, Emily’s new neighbour and eventual first girlfriend. The audience is introduced to Emily’s mother in the kitchen of her large,

well-kept house, preparing a welcoming basket for the new neighbours in a pink dress and high heels. She criticizes a friend of Emily's with pink hair by saying "that kind of lifestyle might fly in Europe, but it's not going to get you very far here", and Emily counters with "not everyone dreams of making it [here], Mom. Some people dream of making it out" (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot'). The use of 'lifestyle' is obvious foreshadowing to Emily's coming out as queer, but more important is the way this scene portrays her family as traditional and overprotective through the use of clothing, visual setting and family dynamics. Emily's family can be interpreted as traditional in the sense that they adhere to specific gender roles, for example, Emily's mother stays at home and is often seen cooking and cleaning whereas her father works in the military and is often overseas, as well as in their overall family dynamics, for example, her parents are much more present in her life than those of her peers and the whole family is often seen eating meals together, in contrast to other families on the show. Emily's family is also the only racialized family on the show, which sets up a possible stereotypical implication that traditional gender roles, familial control and specific expectations for children are features of racialized communities.

Emily's polite disavowal of her mother's expectations, however, creates a slight distance between herself and her family's traditionalism, which is cemented through her interactions with Maya, a racialized girl who is Emily's age. Emily meets Maya when she brings over her mother's welcoming basket, and there is an immediate, visible sexual chemistry between the two girls. As Maya and Emily walk upstairs to Maya's room, playful music sings "don't you wanna/don't you wanna" (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot'). Maya offers Emily marijuana and their conversation is full of thinly veiled innuendos and metaphors for queer sex: this is Emily's "first time" and Maya is "corrupting her" (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot'). The next day, they walk home together, giggling, hands almost

touching and Maya kisses Emily on the cheek goodbye. Emily appears happy about this development until she receives an anonymous note from A.¹⁵, saying that it seems Emily's "found a new friend to kiss" (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot').

It is tempting to see this early affection between Emily and Maya as signs of a subversion of homonormativity through a representation of queer physical affection and sexual chemistry, rather than desexualisation. However, in contrasting this scene with the first scene between the show's main heterosexual couple – Emily's friend Aria and their high school teacher, Ezra Fitz – it becomes clear that queerness becomes (homo)normalized through juxtaposition with (hetero)sexual transgressions. This "normalization through juxtaposition" is the show's most frequent, and compelling, strategy for portraying female teenage queerness as acceptable (Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Aria and Ezra meet at a bar, make out for an extended period of time on a bathroom counter, before discovering he is her new high school English teacher – which does not deter them from continuing to date and engage in physical and sexual affection for the entirety of the season (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot'). Emily and Maya's coded queer metaphors and pecks on the cheek, though still portrayals of physical affection and sexual tension, become innocent in comparison, effectively desexualizing and normalizing their queerness. All four of the girls' secrets are established in the pilot, and Emily's queerness is not only compared to a sixteen year old student dating her high school teacher, which represents an abuse of power that is not acknowledged in the narrative, but also shoplifting, kissing and dating an older sister's boyfriend, as well as a parent's infidelity (Season 1, Episode 1: 'The Pilot').

¹⁵ A. is an anonymous cyber-bully who appears to be omnipresent – she knows all the girls' secrets (including those they had only ever told Alison) and is seemingly aware of their every action and conversation – and sends the girls anonymous text messages with threats of exposing their secrets. A. is presumed to be connected to Alison's murder.

Throughout the next seven episodes leading up to her coming out, Emily's trajectory involves three main characters: her current boyfriend Ben, her new friend Maya, and lab partner (and presumed murderer of Alison) Toby. Emily and Maya cuddle and hold hands during a sleepover, after which Emily receives a cyber-threat from A., letting her know that someone is watching her, and causing her to make out with Ben for what appears to be the first and only time (Season 1, Episode 2: 'The Jenna Thing'). Shortly thereafter, Ben attempts to sexually assault her in the locker room when she refuses his advances. Emily breaks up with him before kissing Maya in a photo booth after Maya tells her she is "crazy beautiful" (Season 1, Episode 3: 'To Kill A Mocking Girl'). Their kiss is sweet, and neither is overly nervous, though Emily is extremely uncomfortable when the pictures of them kissing are stolen and then start showing up randomly in her textbook and sent to others. This fear at being found out leads Emily to argue with Maya, who does not share her fear at their kiss becoming public knowledge, and a reconciliation scene in which Emily asks her for some space, saying "I liked the kiss, but I don't know what that kiss means. I just need to figure out the right thing to do" (Season 1, Episode 4: 'Can You Hear Me Now?'). Emily then bonds with Toby over shared musical interests, goes on a coffee date with him and eventually agrees to go to Homecoming with him as well, even though her friends believe he is Alison's murderer. At Homecoming, Emily and Maya get in another emotional argument, with Emily insisting she is "not hiding anything" and Maya telling her she needs to "come to grips with who [she is]" (Season 1, Episode 6: 'There's No Place Like Homecoming'). The episode culminates in a violent scene between Emily and Toby in which Emily passes out with blood running down her face. Homecoming functions as the final push Emily needs towards accepting her sexuality, and she discusses her desire for Maya with her friend Hanna, before apologizing to Maya, saying that she is "trying this new thing called being

honest with myself” (Season 1, Episode 7: ‘The Homecoming Hangover’). Emily then asks Maya out on a date to the movies, where she confidently takes Maya’s hands in hers, and when the camera pans back to the movie theatre, the two of them are making out, popcorn spilling to the ground as their hands get caught up in each other (Season 1, Episode 8: ‘Please, Do Talk About Me When I’m Gone’).

The complete lack of labels or naming of sexuality in this section of Emily’s trajectory, instead using metaphors and coded references to queerness creates a concrete separation between pre-coming out and post-coming out. This solidifies homonormativity by constructing coming out as an expression of one’s true identity (Berridge, 2012) and a resolution of all one’s struggles pertaining to sexuality (Davis, 2004). Early on, Emily tells her friends that “maybe [she is] not the person everyone thinks [she is]” and her mother that she “thinks there’s something wrong with [her]”, alluding to her feeling different, but not necessarily being recognized as such by others (Season 1, Episode 2: ‘The Jenna Thing’). References to honesty, lying, and truthfulness are also common: Emily tells Maya she is “not hiding anything”, her mother insists that “her daughter doesn’t lie” to a police officer, and angrily tells Emily that she “needs to start being honest with [her], and with [herself]” (Season 1, Episode 6: ‘There’s No Place Like Homecoming’; Season 1, Episode 7: ‘The Homecoming Hangover’). This focus on honesty individualizes queerness, making it into a personal struggle and an internal problem that one can resolve through coming out, erasing the presence of external homophobia in this struggle (Berridge, 2012).

Emily’s ‘hiding’ of her sexuality is also shown through an explicit reference to ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’, the US military policy that excluded queer people from serving openly in the US military, and the repeal of which, and subsequent inclusion of queer people in the military, is a tenet of homonormative politics (Duggan, 2003). The repeal of this

policy is often unproblematically celebrated without attention given to the racialized aspects of US military operations, namely the risking of racialized people's lives through the high numbers of racialized people serving in the US military and the racialized populations in countries where these operations are carried out (Puar, 2007, 2). 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' is also predicated on a closeted/out binary, which reinforces "closeting and coming out narratives" often associated with more privileged white queernesses (Puar, 2007, 2). The scene in which Maya gifts Emily with a bright red scarf reinforces this version of homonormativity by associating the scarf with 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' and the closeted/out binary. Emily denies that the scarf is new when her friends compliment her, much less mentioning that it is from Maya. Seconds later, a friend describes a relationship as a "don't ask don't tell situation", and the camera pans to Emily's scarf, which she later nervously removes and stuffs in her locker (Season 1, Episode 4: 'Can You Hear Me Now?'). When Emily takes Maya out on a date, she puts the scarf back on (Season 1, Episode 8: 'Please, Do Talk About Me When I'm Gone'). The scarf becomes a visual representation of Emily's internal struggle and rising confidence in her identity, but also ensures a separation between a pre- and post- coming out queer identity, and validation of the latter. In the very next episode, Emily comes out to her friends, effectively moving forward on her homonormative trajectory.

Normalization through comparison continues to construct teenage queer desire as acceptable throughout this pre-coming out section. For example, the scene in which Emily and Maya kiss for the first time in the photo booth is preceded and followed by scenes of heterosexual teenage couples making out, as well as juxtaposed with Emily's friend Hanna attempting to have sex for the first time with her boyfriend (Season 1, Episode 3: 'To Kill A Mocking Girl'). While Emily's fear of people finding out she kissed Maya leads her to

momentarily end her relationship with Maya and go on a date with her male lab partner, Toby, Aria makes out with her high school teacher in his apartment after school without worry (Season 1, Episode 5: 'Reality Bites Me'). Additionally, Emily's friend Hanna is accepting of her desire for Maya in part because she believes Toby to be a murderer and does not want Emily to date him (Season 1, Episode 6: 'There's No Place Like Homecoming'). This juxtaposition of a chaste kiss between teenage girls with extended physical affection between a high school student and her teacher, as well as the juxtaposition of a teenage lesbian relationship with dating a presumed murderer leads us to wonder how normative queerness must become in order to be presented as acceptable. In comparison to the prospect of dating a suspected murderer, Maya is presented as the better option for Emily, but it also creates a space in which this comparison – of queerness with murder – is even possible in the first place. Similarly, Emily and Maya kissing is not even remotely similar to an underage Aria kissing her high school teacher, but the narrative juxtaposes these storylines in a way that requires the audience to consider them simultaneously.

In this section, Emily goes through an appropriate amount of internal struggle surrounding her sexuality and brief, unsuccessful attempts at dating boys – the combination of which ensures that her identity as gay is stable even as it is ostensibly fluid. Her internal struggle is not so much to determine whether or not she is gay, but whether or not she is ready to come out and deal with the reality of being out as gay with her family and peers. No labels are used to describe her sexuality during this period: sexuality and queerness are alluded to using metaphors, vague discussions of feelings and the importance of honesty. This lends a seriousness to her queerness not often attributed to young female queerness, as she is waiting to name her identity until she is completely sure, rather than referring to this period as a phase or experimentation. Emily's fears over a cyber-bully's potential revelation

of her queerness achieve this same effect, as well as adding a political element: Emily knows that coming out will permanently change the way in which she moves through the world. On the one hand, this establishes the existence of homophobia and subverts the ideal of homonormativity – of being ‘just like them’, minus the direction of one’s desire. On the other hand, this seriousness attributed to queerness is complicated by the fact that Emily’s family is portrayed as traditional and racialized: she describes them as “Mr. And Mrs. Military and their perfect daughter” with a sad smile and a slightly disdainful tone, the result of which is that it is possible to interpret Emily’s inability to reach this homonormative ideal as a result of her racialized status and her family’s subscription to traditional notions of gender and sexuality that exclude queerness (Season 1, Episode 7: ‘The Homecoming Hangover’). More broadly, it is possible to then interpret Emily’s falling short of homonormativity due to an equating of whiteness with homonormativity and racialization with an unacceptable (and unaccepted) queerness, especially since the military is imagined as a traditional, heteronormative institution to which homonormative politics should focus on accessing (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007). Overall, however, Emily’s storyline leading up to her coming out follows an ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory as she slowly gains confidence in her still unnamed sexuality, by briefly portraying her struggles with her identity on her way to an eventual out, queer happiness.

“Alive and healthy counts for a lot”: Coming out to friends and family

Emily’s coming out takes place over three episodes in the middle of the season, firstly to her friends, and secondly to her parents. In some ways, Emily’s coming out is similar to how teen television has portrayed coming out in the past: her friends are immediately accepting, and her family is initially upset, but eventually also accepting; bullying functions as a push towards coming out and is resolved by the revelation of one’s

true identity (Berridge, 2012). However, Emily is not bullied to come out by her peers, but rather by cyber-bully A. and an adult police officer. Additionally, at this point, Emily has already internally accepted her sexuality, as evidenced by her asking Maya out on a date and her declaration of being honest with herself – she is being pushed to tell others her ‘secret’, not come to terms with it herself.

Emily’s coming out to her friends is painful, and not of her own accord. These sentiments are mirrored in the setting for this scene: a dark, stormy Saturday in which Emily and her friends are at school to take their SAT tests. While studying in the library, Emily receives a text from A., telling her to check out *Great Expectations*, where she finds a letter she had written to Alison. Through flashback, we learn that Emily had been in love with Alison, they had kissed, and Alison had then told Emily that “I like boys...trust me, if I’m kissing you, it’s practice for the real thing” (Season 1, Episode 9: ‘The Perfect Storm’). Emily’s letter describes how hurt she felt by Alison’s actions; thunder, lightning, and a loss of electricity in the library highlight Emily’s pain. Later, she is called away from the other students by Detective Wildon, a police officer; her friends follow them to the library, where he proceeds to simultaneously force her to come out to her friends and accuse her of murdering Alison. The scene is violent: the detective is yelling, Emily is crying, the room is dark and the storm is visible through the window. He pulls Emily’s letter out of his pocket, keeps it out of her reach when she grabs for it, and yells at Emily to tell her friends “how [she] wanted to punish Alison for rejecting [her]...how [she] felt relieved at the funeral...[Alison] wasn’t going to be around to humiliate [her] anymore” (Season 1, Episode 9: ‘The Perfect Storm’). Emily, in tears, looking pleadingly at the detective, admits that “I loved her. As more than a friend. I just never had a chance to tell her in the right way” (Season 1, Episode 9: ‘The Perfect Storm’). Their faces register shock, but they quickly

defend Emily, yelling at the detective and grabbing the letter out of his hand after Spencer's mother arrives to save them from his bullying. Aria briefly comforts Emily, but other than this short conversation, there is no subsequent discussion of Emily's revelation – her sexuality is immediately accepted as a non-issue.

The revelation of Emily's sexuality to her parents is less violent, but no less painful. In the next episode, Emily and Maya are cuddling on Emily's bed when she hears heavy boots coming up the stairs: her father, dressed from head to toe in his military uniform, is home from serving in US military operations in Afghanistan. Emily, visibly ecstatic, introduces Maya to her father as he pulls her in for a hug. Her mother, however, is not pleased to see Maya, telling her that they need some "family time", and we learn that A. has sent her the pictures of Emily and Maya kissing (Season 1, Episode 10: 'Keep Your Friends Close'). Later, Emily's dad lectures her on the importance of being honest, saying "there's an honour in being truthful" and that "it can set [you] free", and Emily almost comes out to him, swallowing, looking down, then right at him, but deciding to tell him she misses him instead (Season 1, Episode 10: 'Keep Your Friends Close'). The next day, the three of them are eating breakfast, her dad at the head of the table, commenting on her mom's cooking. After Emily goes to school, her parents are cuddling on the couch, talking about the household chores: her mom says that "this house isn't going to vacuum itself" and her dad mentions fixing the water heater (Season 1, Episode 11: 'Moments Later'). Her mom says that Emily needs him because she is "really confused right now" before getting up to continue vacuuming, all of which ensures that Emily's family is seen as subscribing to traditional gender roles and family dynamics (Season 1, Episode 11: 'Moments Later'). That night, Emily's dad comes into her room and confronts her about what she is hiding from him. His voice is questioning, but firm, and Emily nervously admits that she is afraid of him and her

mom “because [she is] not who [they] think [she] is” (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). He says of course she is, she is his “little girl”, and Emily, with tears in her eyes, quietly says “I’m gay”, pauses, then repeats herself, loudly and firmly (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). Her dad sits down, confused, and the camera angle allows the audience to take in the pink flowers on Emily’s wallpaper and the numerous trophies on her shelves. Later, Emily is crying while listening from upstairs to her parents argue about how to deal with Emily’s revelation: her mother thinks this is “completely wrong” and they need to “fix it”; her dad “doesn’t like this” but thinks that being “alive and healthy counts for a lot” (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’).

Though different, both of Emily’s coming out scenes ensure her homonormative trajectory remains on track. Strong friendships function as a defense against homophobia – and, in a sense, queerness – and simultaneously individualize queerness. Queer characters’ strong, gender-conforming friendships with heterosexual characters solidify their existence within dominant heteronormative social structures, such as friendship and femininity (Zeller-Jacques, 2011; Driver, 2006). This connection between friendship and normativity is especially clear with queer youth characters that are at an age when heteronormative friendships are often the most important social structure in determining one’s relative acceptance or non-acceptance in a high school setting. Their queerness is then both homonormative and individualized: they remain disconnected from queer communities, demonstrate that their queerness does not disrupt social structures of friendship, and are seen as ‘just like’ their friends, excepting only their queerness (Davis, 2004; Driver, 2006; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Just before Emily is forced to come out by the detective, Hanna tells Emily that she can tell Aria and Spencer about her and Maya, saying that “it doesn’t have to be this huge secret...you can trust them”, constructing Emily’s reluctance to come out as an

individual problem – her own – and not the result of external pressure, effectively erasing the existence of homophobia in society (Season 1, Episode 9: ‘The Perfect Storm’). Her friends are also clearly instantly accepting of her revelation, in fact, other than Aria comforting Emily immediately afterwards, there is no discussion of her sexuality whatsoever amongst her friends except for a brief reassurance that everything will be fine after she comes out to her parents (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). This immediate acceptance reassures the audience that Emily’s queerness fits within, and does not disrupt, social structures of gender-conforming teenage friendships (Zeller-Jacques, 2011).

Part of this acceptance of queerness as a non-issue is achieved through juxtaposition with the revelation of Aria’s (hetero)sexual transgressions. During the episode in which Emily comes out to her parents, Aria reveals her secret – that she is dating their high school teacher – to the girls. Her friends react similarly to Aria’s secret as they did Emily’s: initially shocked, but very quickly accepting. The juxtaposition of Aria and Emily’s revelations in this episode is so explicit there is almost a conflation of their secrets: the girls discuss how A. has bullied both Aria and Emily to disclose their relationships; Aria and Emily discuss Aria’s revelation, Aria explaining that if she “[says] something, to anyone, [she] can’t take it back” and Emily, understandingly, responds that “[she] know what [Aria] means” (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). In that Emily and Aria’s very different relationships receive similar reactions, this conflation allows Emily’s queerness to become easily accepted by her friends not necessarily due to a particularly acceptable quality of queerness, but possibly rather due to the strength and unconditional support found in their friendship.

Emily’s homonormative status is further cemented in this section through the confirmation of her stable identity through the use of labels and flashback scenes revealing past queer desire. Flashbacks to Emily’s feelings for, and kisses with, Alison allow the

audience to understand that Emily has always been queer, and has always known she was queer – her brief attempts at dating boys were only due to a hesitancy to come out and negotiate her world as queer, not because her identity was ever in flux. Her confession that she “loved [Alison] as more than a friend” also ensures that her queer past is not seen as sexual experimentation, but rather as legitimate, queer romantic feelings, further stabilizing her identity (Season 1, Episode 9: ‘The Perfect Storm’). Emily’s choice to label herself as gay when coming out to her parents, and even her repetition of the phrase “I’m gay”, is a testament to the stability of her identity (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). Emily is not saying she is bi, or queer, or questioning, or that she likes girls, or that she has a girlfriend – she is gay. Her certainty in her gay identity, on the one hand, reinforces her homonormative status, but on the other, very clearly subverts the teen television genre and dominant conceptions of teenage female queerness. Teenage girls on television have not generally self-identified as gay; rather, they often ‘experiment’, ‘like people, regardless of gender’, like a particular person of the same gender, or are sexually fluid – all of which are legitimate sexual identities that should be respected on television. Constantly representing teenage female queerness as experimental, a phase, or fluidity, however, erases the experiences of teenage girls for whom a gay identity does resonate. Emily’s assurance her in identity as gay represents an important milestone for teenage female queerness and a new framework through which teenage girls can understand their own sexuality, especially given her racialized status and the lack of representations of racialized queerness more broadly.

The aftermath of Emily’s coming out to her parents represents perhaps the most explicit example of the ways in which homonationalism structures our understanding of queerness. Emily’s parents are coded as traditional in this scene through the reproduction of gender binaries and roles: both are angry, though her father remains calm, whereas her

mother is emotional, upset, on the verge of tears (Season 1, Episode 11: 'Moments Later'). Her mother is adamant that Emily's queerness is not something innate in her, but rather something that has been put on her by an Other, in this case, "that girl from California" (Season 1, Episode 11: 'Moments Later'). As she gets increasingly upset, she yells at Emily's father: "Are you willing to just turn away from everything we ever wanted for her? Let her ruin her life? So she can experiment? What happened to you? What happened to your values? Did you just leave them out there in the desert somewhere?" (Season 1, Episode 11: 'Moments Later').

Emily's mother's accusations simultaneously suggest to the audience that Emily's father previously understood queerness in the same way she currently does, as unacceptable, and also that his views on queerness have recently shifted. Her use of 'values' to refer to Emily's sexuality, as well as her inability to name Emily's sexuality as queer or gay, rather choosing to mention 'values', 'experiments', and earlier, 'confusion' also sets her up as adhering to traditional notions of gender and sexuality in which queerness does not exist. Her accusation that Emily's father has lost his values in the 'desert' suggests that this recent change in his previously traditional values happened while he was serving in the US military overseas in Afghanistan, which opens up a host of possible analyses of the relationship between queerness, the US military, and its operations. Just as Emily's queerness could not be something innate, it is possible to understand that neither could her father's acceptance of this queerness: his change in values must be as a result of his time with the Other in the 'desert' (Puar, 2007). Puar's articulation of homonationalism as the acceptance of a domesticated white queerness in order to produce the image of a perverse terrorist sexuality upon which a war can be waged can be read in this scene through the conflation of a change in traditional values with time serving in the military overseas (2007). Emily's father's

response that “after everything [he’s] seen, alive and healthy counts for a lot, believe me” suggests that though his daughter may be queer, compared with his experiences fighting the ‘war on terror’, her queerness is not wholly unacceptable (Season 1, Episode 11: ‘Moments Later’). Alternatively, his recent leaning towards an acceptance of queerness can also be read as a reification of homonormative politics centered on the inclusion of queer people in the military, and as a demonstration of the flexibility of the military as an institution to accept certain queer identities (Duggan, 2003).

Regardless of whether it is the military as an institution, or the specific US military operations in which he was involved that led to a change in her father’s views on queerness, this scene complicates homonationalism and homonormativity through the racialization of Emily’s family. Emily’s parents’ intolerance of her queerness at this point (as compared to, for example, her friends’ immediate acceptance) can also be interpreted as a result of their racialization, and stereotypical associations of homophobia with racialized communities. Her family has been coded as traditional in many ways – scenes at the breakfast table, her parents completing gendered chores, their overall family dynamic – which is meant to explain their difficulty with Emily’s revelation, but we cannot ignore that in addition to being coded as the most traditional family on the show, they are also the only racialized family. In that homonationalism depends on the separation of white queerness from racialized heterosexuality, we can also understand this scene as Emily’s inability to properly perform acceptable (white) queerness. Post-coming out, however, Emily does continue to represent homonormative queerness as she moves through her high school as queer, despite her racialization, subverting homonormative scripts even as she performs them.

“We go to dinner and a movie, just like you guys”: *Negotiating high school while out*

Emily’s trajectory post-coming out reveals the key to negotiating high school while out: embody homonormativity as much as possible, deal with any homophobia on an individual level, rely on supportive friendships, and life will indeed get better. In this section of her trajectory, Emily has Maya over for dinner to officially introduce her as her girlfriend, and her parents have very different reactions: her dad is friendly and supportive; her mother puts in an effort but ends up crying in the pantry and rejecting Emily again (Season 1, Episode 12: ‘Salt Meets Wound’). Emily and Maya continue to spend time together at school with Emily’s friends, and studying after school in her bedroom, where an extremely upset Mrs. Fields finds them, leading to a confrontation with Emily about how “[she] can’t live like this” (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). Mrs. Fields later goes through Maya’s bags and finds marijuana, which leads to a second confrontation with Emily in which she forbids her from seeing Maya as well as Maya being sent away to a rehabilitation centre. Emily’s friends organize a romantic goodbye for Emily and Maya complete with candles, champagne and music (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). However, in the next episode, Emily fears Maya has forgotten about her and gets drunk to deal with her heartbreak (Season 1, Episode 14: ‘Careful What U Wish 4’). Emily is then bullied by a swimming teammate, Paige, who makes homophobic comments when Emily beats her in a race, and after Spencer tells their coach in an attempt to protect Emily, Paige physically attacks Emily in the pool (Season 1, Episode 15: ‘If At First You Don’t Succeed, Lie, Lie Again’). Paige subsequently apologizes to Emily, and Emily, recognizing her former closeted self in Paige, forgives her (Season 1, Episode 16: ‘Je suis une amie’). Paige’s dad then shows up at school, and accuses the coach of privileging Emily over Paige because of Emily’s sexuality, which leads to a confrontation between Emily’s mom and Paige’s dad in

which Emily's mom defends her daughter and then, crying, tells her she loves her, even if she "still doesn't understand" (Season 1, Episode 17: 'The New Normal').

Emily understands that the way to help her parents come around to accepting her queerness is through a successful performance of homonormativity in her relationship with Maya. Emily is nervous about dinner with her parents and tells Maya to wear a dress and not to make jokes or references to queer culture; in other words, do not bring attention to our queer difference. During dinner, Emily further tries to minimize any queerness by encouraging Maya to talk about her (heterosexual) parents and family, and Maya tells a story about how her father proposed to her mother (Season 1, Episode 12: 'Salt Meets Wound'). Not once during dinner does the conversation revolve around Emily and Maya's relationship, only their families, effectively turning a dinner ostensibly about queerness into a display of normative heterosexuality. However, Maya does fail slightly, explaining that she and her brother were born before their parents were married and her mother has a tattoo for a wedding ring, allowing the audience to understand Mrs. Fields' discomfort not necessarily as a result of Emily's queerness, but possibly rather Emily and Maya's failed attempt at homonormative queerness. This scene also shows Emily's respect for her parents and is consistent with the way Emily's family has been coded as both traditional and close-knit: her parents might be more protective than her friends' parents, but they are also more present in her life.

Emily and Maya's attempts at homonormative queerness also take place among their peers, to a greater degree of success this time. At school, Maya asks Emily about their plans for studying late, and when Hanna asks if studying is "girl on girl code for romance", Maya jokes about "picnics by the lake [and] dancing naked in candlelight" (Season 1, Episode 13: 'Know Your Frenemies'). Her friends, though still smiling, look at them with incredulous,

widening eyes and Emily assures them that she and Maya are “just kidding. We go to dinner and a movie, just like you guys” (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). Emily’s “just like you guys” functions as both an explicit reassurance that her friends’ acceptance of her queerness is indeed warranted as well as an assurance of the homonormative status of that queerness – she and Maya are the same as them, excepting only gender. The fact that Emily’s reassurance is in reference to Maya’s description of queer desire is noteworthy, as queerness gains its status as queer through its association with a non-normative desire. For queerness to be truly homonormative, it must be desexualized, as is clear in the ‘goodbye’ surprise Emily’s friends plan for her and Maya. The set up of the scene is reminiscent of a stereotypical romantic sex scene: Emily goes upstairs to find Spencer’s room filled with candles, champagne, strawberries and an emotional Maya with tears in her eyes. Teary eyed, they smile sadly before reaching out to touch each other, but instead of kissing, they begin to slow dance (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). Romantic music plays as they hug and slow dance before coming downstairs to thank Emily’s friends and kiss chastely goodbye, suggesting a homonormative sex scene is one that does not involve sex, or even kissing. This desexualizing of queer desire, combined with Hanna’s incredulous smile as she realizes that she is “officially jealous of Emily’s love life”, reinforces not only homonormativity but also heteronormativity (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). Emily’s friends are accepting to the point where it becomes clear that queerness is not, in fact, just like heterosexuality – queerness, no matter how normative, is different, as demonstrated by their surprise at their jealousy of Emily and condescending smiles at the success of their goodbye surprise.

These simultaneous narratives of homonormativity and heteronormativity are also present in Emily’s mother’s difficulty accepting her queerness. Though her father quickly

comes to accept Emily's queerness and her relationship with Maya, her mother has a much more difficult time – crying during dinner, telling Emily afterwards that “the whole thing makes [her] sick” and getting angry and upset when she finds Emily and Maya studying in Emily's bedroom (Season 1, Episode 12: ‘Salt Meets Wound’). Though her understanding of queerness is clearly structured by homophobia, her hesitancy is still consistent with a homonormative, ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory – ‘It Gets Better’ is not a denial of the existence of homophobia but rather the idea that eventually, through the performance of a certain homonormative queerness, homophobia can be overcome. Emily's reaction to her mother in this last scene, in which she says that “for the first time in [her] life, [she is] ashamed that [Mrs. Fields is] [her] mother” demonstrates that a homonormative queerness is one that derives a certain degree of strength and pride in its normative stability and as a result is capable of responding to overt homophobia (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). This strength through stability is further demonstrated in Emily and her mother's second confrontation, when her mother says that Emily's “no longer allowed to see [Maya]” and Emily, crying, yells that “this doesn't change the way I feel about her”: in other words, homophobia may exist, but it is not strong enough to disrupt a stable queer identity (Season 1, Episode 13: ‘Know Your Frenemies’). As a homonormative queer identity is portrayed as one that will eventually achieve full acceptance, this suggests that one need only deal with homophobia in the short-term, making it easier to overcome.

Emily's brief locker room bullying storyline reveals just how short-term experiences with homophobia can be when one is properly performing homonormativity, while also acknowledging the complicated existence of homophobic bullying. When Paige makes a snide comment about what “team [Emily] really plays for”, and Emily's friends tell the swim coach, Emily is furious, saying that if “[she] wanted [the coach] to know what Paige had

said, [she] would have told her [herself]...[she] can stick up for [herself]" (Season 1, Episode 15: 'If At First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again'). When the coach confronts Emily and Paige about an "incident involving a homophobic comment" that goes against the school's "zero tolerance policy", Emily says it was all just a misunderstanding (Season 1, Episode 15: 'If At First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again'). Later, Paige physically attacks Emily in the pool, accusing Emily of having told the coach "because [her] feelings were hurt" (Season 1, Episode 15: 'If At First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again'). This portrayal of homophobic bullying that takes place post-coming out, once a character's identity is comfortably established as queer, on the one hand, subverts a genre that often portrays homophobic bullying as a push towards coming out that can be resolved by admitting one's sexuality, and is a potentially realistic – and needed – representation of the lived experiences of many queer youth (Berridge 2012). This scene also critiques zero-tolerance policies and the idea that bullying is always best resolved solely by punishing the perpetrators, rather than addressing the existence of homophobia in society more broadly. By showing Paige's violent reaction to an authority figure's involvement and Emily's anger at not being in control of the decision to take action against her bully, this scene suggests the possibility of alternative ways to address bullying.

On the other hand, this portrayal of bullying also opens up the potential to individualize queerness and blame the victim of the bullying by suggesting that homophobic bullying is best addressed at the individual, bully-to-bullied level. The resolution of this storyline tends to privilege the latter interpretation: Paige, crying, apologizes to Emily and we learn that Paige herself is gay and her actions are the result of internalized homophobia (Season 1, Episode 17: 'The New Normal'). Additionally, this leads Emily's mother to confront Paige's father and come to terms with Emily's sexuality, realistically admitting that

“[she] still doesn’t understand, but [she] loves Emily. [She is] her child. And nobody hurts [her] child”, demonstrating that parental acceptance of queerness may not be instantaneous, but it is an eventuality (Season 1, Episode 17: ‘The New Normal’). Overall, homophobic bullying post-coming out becomes rooted in internalized homophobia, not external homophobic pressures in society at large. This privileging of an ‘It Gets Better’ version of homophobic bullying will certainly not resonate with the lived experiences of all queer youth, though the inclusion of this storyline, does, in some way, acknowledge the presence of homophobic bullying in the lives of queer youth and offer a more political representation of youth queerness, slightly subverting homonormativity.

“I don’t want to be your secret”: Stability, multiple love interests, and still gay

The final section of Emily’s storyline confirms this privileging of a homonormative ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory through the confirmation of her stable queer identity and the assertion that a good, happy queer life depends on being, and staying, ‘out’, while continuing to subvert these same homonormative structures by lending a political quality to queerness. In this section, Paige kisses Emily unexpectedly before saying “don’t tell” and running away (Season 1, Episode 17: ‘The New Normal’). Paige and Emily then attempt to date, singing karaoke, going on picnics and kissing before Emily decides she cannot date Paige if Paige is not comfortable being out in public (Season 1, Episode 19: ‘A Person of Interest’). Emily meets Samara, a member of a local campus pride group while trying to help Paige come out, which leads to a confrontation with a jealous Paige where Emily decides she does not “want to be [Paige’s] secret” (Season 1, Episode 21: ‘Monsters In The End’). At the end of the season, Emily is unhappily contemplating a move to Texas, where her father is stationed, preferring to stay in town with her friends and Samara (Season 1, Episode 22: ‘For Whom The Bells Toll’).

The stability of Emily's queer identity is explicitly confirmed through the use of labels, the introduction of multiple love interests, the rejection of a previous male love interest, and discussions of both a queer past and a queer future. Post-coming out, Emily refers to herself as gay multiple times: in reference to her experience of homophobic bullying, in reference to coming out, in discussion of past queer relationships and when speaking to other queer girls (Season 1, Episode 15: 'If At First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again'; Season 1, Episode 17: 'The New Normal'). Even when friends avoid the label 'gay', referencing instead that "[she] and Maya [are] a couple", Emily responds by using 'gay' to describe herself (Season 1, Episode 15: 'If At First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again'). Additionally, when Toby, whom she very briefly dated before coming out, returns to town, Emily suggests they go out to celebrate and Toby, smiling, asks "what happened to Maya?" (Season 1, Episode 18: 'The Badass Seed'). Emily quickly and firmly rejects his advances, saying that she "meant celebrate as friends", leaving no ambiguity as to her sexuality (Season 1, Episode 18: 'The Badass Seed'). The introduction of multiple queer love interests similarly ensures that Emily's sexuality remains stable: Paige is introduced two episodes after Maya leaves, after an episode that deals with Emily's heartbreak at Maya's leaving, and Samara is introduced after Paige and Emily have dated, broken up, gotten back together, and broken up again. Emily also runs through her queer history with Paige, explaining how Maya was her first girlfriend, but that she had previously been in love with and kissed Alison, though Alison did not love her back, reminding us once again that Emily's identity as gay has always been intact (Season 1, Episode 19: 'A Person of Interest'). In the final episode of the season, when Emily's mother suggests that a "fresh start" would be good for her, Emily disagrees, stating that "[she] felt like an outsider for so long...[she is starting] to feel like [she] belongs here", rejecting the idea that her queerness is anything other than an innate

quality, or that her new, out queer life is not what is right for her (Season 1, Episode 22: 'For Whom The Bells Toll'). The stability of her queer identity represents an appropriate end to her homonormative trajectory, but also represents an important subversion of the teen television genre in terms of portrayals of female teenage queerness. Given the history of queer girls returning to straight male main characters after brief experimental phases with another girl, Emily's quick rejection of Toby and multiple female love interests represent an important milestone in representations of queer girls, as do her repeated, self-assured statements about her sexuality. Though homonormative, Emily's character disrupts heteronormativity and complicates dominant conceptions of female teenage queerness.

The privileging of a homonormative 'It Gets Better' trajectory is most evident through the status accorded to being 'out' and the representation of coming out as a specific step along a track to queer happiness. Emily's hesitancy at dating Paige stems from Paige's closeted status and clear boundaries around that status:

Paige: We might see people we know there. I can't risk being seen with you. I thought you understood.

Emily: I so understand. Believe me, I do. But hearing you say that, ouch.

Paige: I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I had an amazing time last night and I would really like to keep seeing you.

Emily: Like this? Always in the middle of nowhere?

Paige: It's the only way I can do it.

Emily: I'm not ashamed of who I am. But I used to be. And if we have to hide like this, I'm going to start to feel like that way again.

Paige: I like you, Emily.

Emily: I like you too. And I'll always be here for you. But I think it needs to be as friends. (Season 1, Episode 19: 'A Person of Interest')

Paige is proposing a different way of being queer, one that does not require being 'out' to everyone in her life; she is not questioning her queerness, or her strong feelings for Emily, but rather the idea that a happy queer is a proud, 'out' queer (Ahmed, 2010). Emily, however, is adamant that a homonormative trajectory is a teleological trajectory – one that is always moving forwards to the end goal of out, queer happiness and success – and that having to hide her sexuality would be a step backwards on that trajectory. Emily is positing that there is only one possible trajectory that leads to queer happiness; she is choosing “we’re just like you guys” over secret picnics in the woods (Season 1, Episode 13: 'Know Your Frenemies'). Emily changes her mind about Paige when after giving her a speech about how she “didn’t come out of the closet, [she] fell out on [her] face. But [she is] out, and whatever else happens, [she] doesn’t need to worry about it anymore”, and Paige, crying, admits she is gay and Emily rewards her with a kiss (Season 1, Episode 20: 'Someone To Watch Over Me'). Emily is not only presenting being 'out' as better than being closeted – a step towards the elusive 'Better' in 'It Gets Better' – she is also presenting coming out as a singular, cumulative experience, denying the reality that many queer youth must come out over and over again in different contexts (Puar, 2010). Emily explicitly states that she feels that dating Paige would be “a step back for [her]” when talking to Samara, who agrees, saying she dated a closeted girl once and it was “too much drama”, again portraying being 'out' as inherently better than not being out (Season 1, Episode 21: 'Monsters In The End'). Paige, however, continues to suggest alternative ways of being happily queer, saying she is “not looking to join a club and ride down Main Street on a rainbow chopper”, but that this doesn’t negate her feelings for Emily (Season 1, Episode 21: 'Monsters In The End'). Emily’s rejection of Paige

in favour of proudly out Samara at the end of the season cements Emily's privileging of a homonormative trajectory over alternative ways of living a queer life, and her status as acceptably queer.

Within this privileging of a homonormative trajectory, Emily does simultaneously provide a degree of subversion of this trajectory by speaking about queerness as a source of struggle in her life, despite having followed the path to homonormativity, and by extension, happiness. When a still-closeted Paige suggests that Emily's life is "easy", Emily responds with incredulous anger, yelling "Easy? What planet do you live on? I spend most of my life trying not to feel the way I feel. I come out and they ship my first girlfriend off to god knows where. And now maybe she is done with me. So yeah, it's all about Emily. All Em, all the time" (Season 1, Episode 17: 'The New Normal'). Emily's naming of Maya's being punished stemming from queerness, and firmly rejecting the idea that her life is 'easy' just because she is out is decidedly not apolitical, as is the norm among representations of female teenage queerness (Zeller-Jacques, 2011). In that homonormativity posits queer happiness as an eventuality so long as one accepts one's true identity and is able to live within dominant heteronormative institutions, Emily's statement that she has experienced disappointment and homophobia post-coming out complicates the 'It Gets Better' trajectory. This expression of struggles related to queerness can again be interpreted through Emily and Maya's racialized status and homonormativity's dependence on whiteness, resulting in their inability to easily achieve queer happiness, though Emily's racialization becomes increasingly erased as the season progresses. Paige's willingness to simultaneously clearly express her feelings for Emily and her wish to remain closeted can also be interpreted as a subversion of homonormativity by not only presenting an alternative queer model but also by acknowledging the real barriers faced by queer youth negotiating relationships due external

homophobic realities. Similarly, when Paige hesitantly says that “if [she] says it out loud, if [she] says, [she is] gay...the whole world is going to change”, she is not suggesting that her whole world will change for the better: she is suggesting her world will be filled with very real discrimination as a result of her sexuality (Season 1, Episode 20: ‘Someone To Watch Over Me’). However, by associating a more political queerness with a secondary character and allowing Emily to continue performing homonormativity, the overall privileging of an ‘It Gets Better’ trajectory remains secure.

At the end of the first season of *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily embodies a young, stable, racialized female queer identity. This queer identity, established in the premiere, maintained throughout the entire season, and confirmed in the final episodes, represents an important milestone in the teen television genre: a fleshed out racialized queer girl character with a sustained storyline who becomes much more than her sexuality. In order to achieve this important milestone, however, Emily is represented as acceptably queer, someone who follows a homonormative trajectory towards queer happiness. Her homonormative trajectory is established through flashbacks demonstrating a queer history, an appropriate amount of internal struggle and unsuccessful attempts at sexual fluidity before coming out as gay and receiving immediate acceptance from friends and eventual acceptance from family. Post-coming out, Emily engages in monogamous, desexualized, age-appropriate romantic relationships, and refuses to engage in any relationships that might compromise her status as comfortably, proudly ‘out’ as gay. Though this homonormative trajectory remains privileged throughout the season, Emily subverts this trajectory through her performance of racialized homonormativity, disrupting conceptions of acceptable queerness as white, and her expression of political statements exposing the existence of heteronormativity, and sometimes even homophobia, in her life post-coming out. Homonormativity and

heteronormativity coexist and compete with each other in Emily's world, simultaneously suggesting she is 'just like' her heterosexual friends, and also inherently different. Emily's adherence to, and subversion of, this homonormative 'It Gets Better' trajectory from a young, racialized queer girl creates new frameworks for non-normative sexuality for youth viewers, a version of racialized teenage female queerness that is new to the teen television genre.

Youth engagement with Pretty Little Liars' Emily and queer identity in online communities

Pretty Little Liars' online youth communities allow for further elaboration on the new frameworks for non-normative sexuality created by Emily's trajectory. The comment sections on three specific episodes (Episode 2: 'The Jenna Thing'; Episode 9: 'The Perfect Storm'; Episode 17: 'The New Normal') on both abcfamily.com and afterellen.com complement the previous critical discourse analysis of Emily's trajectory by providing examples of the way this discourse surrounding queerness circulates in online youth communities. The two distinct communities – abcfamily.com is the official website for the show; afterellen.com represents a specific queer girl community – allow for a broader analysis of the cultural possibilities generated by Emily's storyline. This analysis is not meant to be quantitative or comprehensive; it is simply meant to provide a picture of youth's engagement with representations of teenage female queerness in online communities.

In Episode 2: 'The Jenna Thing', Emily's queerness has been established through flashbacks, queer love interests and admissions of feeling 'different', but it has not yet been confirmed through coming out or self-identification. Emily and Maya flirt, have a sleepover in which they cuddle and hold hands, and Emily kisses her boyfriend before expressing confusion over her sexuality (Season 1, Episode 2: 'The Jenna Thing'). Though comments

on abcfamily.com centre mostly around the show's central mystery (i.e. who is A), and their positive views of the show in general, comments reflecting confusion at the ambiguity of Emily's sexuality are also present. These comments range from incredulous (multiple question marks), to vaguely homophobic (assertions that the commenter is not judging), to proud ("go Emily!"): commenters decide Emily either likes girls, is bi, is a lesbian or is being true to herself (ABC Family, 2010a). Comments on afterellen.com, however, are much more focused on the characters of Emily and Maya than the show's plot. There is no ambiguity as to Emily's sexuality in this online community: her queerness is established as certain and commenters look to the future instead, expressing hope that the writers will allow Emily to come out and engage in physical affection with Maya, as well imploring the writers not to make Maya the villain. Comments also centre on their enjoyment at watching Emily's character, specifically due to their ability to see themselves reflected in her character (Hogan, 2010e). At this point, both afterellen.com and abcfamily.com commenters are looking for an explicit confirmation of Emily's sexuality, though the emphasis in the latter community is the hope that this confirmation will take place through a fleshed out queer character with a storyline that reflects their own experiences.

Episode 9: 'The Perfect Storm' reads similarly to a special-issue episode, in which most of the episode centers around Emily as she comes out to her friends after being bullied by the detective and being accused of having destroyed Alison's memorial and possibly killing her. Unsurprisingly, more comments on abcfamily.com focus on Emily than usual due to her prominence in this episode. Commenters' reactions to Emily's coming out range from wishing she was not gay because they liked her with Toby to feeling pride that she was honest about her sexuality. Though homophobia is discernible (for example, one comment suggests that Emily's queerness is reason enough to suspect she destroyed the memorial), for

the most part, commenters are extremely sympathetic towards Emily, expressing anger at the detective for forcing her to come out, and favourable views of her character in general (ABC Family, 2010b). Afterellen.com commenters echo this sympathy for Emily and anger at the detective, but their anger is also directed at Alison: commenters focus on the flashback scene in which shows Alison flirts with and then harshly rejects Emily, of which they wholeheartedly disapprove. They also pick up on more varied aspects of Emily's coming out storyline, for example, expressing happiness at Hanna's unconditional support as Emily struggles with coming out. Commenters also express their own imagined coming out scenes for Emily, mostly involving physical affection between Emily and Maya, and continued to express a desire for more queer physical affection in the future (Hogan, 2010f). At this crucial point in Emily's trajectory, both abcfamily.com and afterellen.com commenters are largely supportive of Emily's sexuality, and her admission of queerness does not impede on viewers' overall favourable opinions of Emily's character.

In Episode 17: 'The New Normal', Paige's dad accuses the high school of privileging Emily due to their 'gay agenda', Emily's mom confronts him and finally comes around to her daughter's sexuality, and Paige unexpectedly kisses Emily. At this point in her trajectory, Emily's identity as gay is both stable and confirmed. Abcfamily.com commenters focus on Emily's storyline only minimally, mostly commenting on the overall mystery and the two other potential couples – both straight – who were introduced in this episode. Only one commenter mentions how they appreciated Emily's mother sticking up for her; all the other comments relating to Emily focus on her kiss with Paige. Commenters are generally supportive of the possibility of a Paige and Emily coupling, either expressing surprise or that they had been expecting this, with one commenter even expressing her love for "Paily" (Emily and Paige's relationship name) (ABC Family, 2011). Afterellen.com commenters, on

the other hand, focused almost exclusively on Emily's storyline in this episode, not only her kiss with Paige but also on Emily's mother beginning to accept her sexuality. Their comments surrounding the Paige/Emily kiss were much more nuanced: whether the lack of consent made it "creepy" or whether it was understandable as result of Paige's internalized homophobia and familial situation. Positive reactions to Emily's mother's actions were mostly based on the reflection of their own experiences, finding it realistic that she did not immediately accept Emily's sexuality and appreciated her distinction between love, understanding and acceptance (Hogan, 2011b). Though the level of nuance differs, Emily remains a likeable character, capable of reflecting viewers' experiences and capturing their attention in both abcfamily.com and afterellen.com online communities.

Youth viewers' comments in online *Pretty Little Liars* communities demonstrate the extent to which the show creates space for youth to discuss non-normative sexuality, specifically, young, racialized female queerness. In allowing Emily to become a three dimensional, sympathetic, complex character who is more than just her sexuality, *Pretty Little Liars* allows youth audiences to root for, relate to and even 'love' Emily. The abcfamily.com comment sections clearly prove that heteronormativity exists – Emily's relationships are still less discussed than those of her heterosexual friends – but that positive conversations about youth queerness can exist within these ostensibly heteronormative spaces. The afterellen.com comment sections reinforce the strong, affective relationships queer youth viewers form with queer teenage characters: commenters compare Emily's experiences to their own, explaining where her storylines reflect and resonate with their experiences and when they wish a storyline had been expressed differently. Youth engagement with Emily's storyline demonstrates the broader cultural possibilities enabled by her 'It Gets Better' trajectory of queer happiness through the creation of affective

relationships between youth viewers and her character. In combination with my critical discourse analysis of Emily's portrayal of youth queerness, the comments expressed by youth viewers illustrate the ways in which Emily's homonormative 'It Gets Better' trajectory, constrained by both heteronormativity and homonormativity, does important cultural work in representing teenage female queerness as not only acceptable, but also cause for pride and praise, and creating spaces where this queerness can be expressed, discussed and celebrated.

Chapter 3: *Degrassi's* Adam Torres and transnormativity

Introduction

Trans* youth characters on contemporary teen television provide insight into the social processes at play in the representation of non-normative gender identities in mainstream media. These characters help us to discern the processes of normalization by which certain trans* identities become consumable by mainstream audiences. Critical analyses of these representations of trans* youth characters, illustrate the cultural work done by the telling of these stories in relation to their normalization. The new frameworks of youth gender identity these stories create – frameworks of trans* identity in youth, transmasculinity and non-normative gender identities more broadly – allow for youth to engage in discussion, learning and education about gender identity. *Degrassi's* Adam Torres, a main character who is a white trans boy in grade ten at Degrassi Community School, represents the potential for the establishment of a normalized trans* identity on television, and helps to elucidate the concept of transnormativity. In this chapter, I will argue that Adam represents a normalized trans identity that potentially subverts processes of normalization by remaining connected to political struggles. Transnormativity has recently been formulated by Cael Keegan in reference to the appearance of transgender characters in mainstream mass media and is the process by which certain trans* identities come to exist comfortably within dominant social structures, such as the gender binary and heteronormativity (2013, 28). Adam represents this potential for transnormativity through his characterization as white, straight and upper-middle class, his subscription to narratives of body dysphoria, his strong friendships and relationships with his family, and his reinforcement of a gender binary through identification with dominant conceptions of masculinity. Adam is also never reduced solely to his gender identity: friendships, family relationships, theatre, music, video games and sports all figure

prominently in his narrative and contribute to the normalization of his trans identity by demonstrating his sameness to his peers. His character remains political, however, by consistently experiencing and dealing with transphobia as he negotiates life as a high school student.

A brief study of the political economy of production of *Degrassi* will first situate Adam's character within the locations in which he is created and produced, namely television network Much Music and production company Epitome Pictures. A critical discourse analysis of Adam's character and storyline, focusing on his potential for discursively representing transnormativity as well as political struggles connected to his trans identity, combined with the comments made by youth viewers in *Degrassi's* online communities will reveal the new frameworks for non-normative gender identities in youth created by Adam's character through his transnormative identity. This analysis of Adam's storyline will also help to elucidate the characteristics of transnormativity and add to the emerging literature on transnormativity. Adam's character will demonstrate the cultural work normative televisual representations of youth trans* identities can do through the creation of spaces for discussion, celebration and education surrounding gender identity.

Degrassi's Political Economy of Production

I will firstly examine television network Much Music and production company Epitome Pictures in order to understand how Adam's character came to exist on teen television. Season 10 of *Degrassi* airs on Much Music, a Canadian youth- and young adult-oriented network that focuses on youth pop cultures, including celebrity, music and television (Bell Media, 2013). Originally known for music video shows, Much Music now includes music programming, celebrity and music news shows and live performances alongside television programming (Much Music, 2013c). Much Music also focuses on

engaging with youth viewers through contests, award shows, social media and showcasing “user-generated content” on their website (Bell Media, 2013). Much Music is distinctly Canadian, based in Toronto and aims to “spotlight home-grown talent”, mainly by promoting Canadian music artists and television shows (Bell Media, 2013). Many popular US teen television shows, however, find their Canadian homes on Much Music, such as *Pretty Little Liars* and *Gossip Girl*, airing alongside Canadian productions (Much Music, 2013c). In 2007, Much Music was acquired by Bell Media, one of Canada’s largest media operations, including radio, television and digital media, billing itself as “Canada’s premier multimedia company” (Bell Media, 2013). Bell Media is a subsidiary of Bell Canada Enterprises, Inc., a major national media and communications company (BCE, 2013). *Degrassi* airs in the US on Teen Nick, a youth oriented network that airs programming aimed at children, youth and young adults (Teen Nick, 2013).

Degrassi’s production team also speaks to its specifically Canadian location. *Degrassi* is produced by Epitome Pictures, a small, Toronto-based production company that was founded in 1995 (Epitome Pictures, 2013). Currently, Epitome Pictures produces *Degrassi* and one other teen television show, and has previously produced only three shows other than *Degrassi* (Epitome Pictures, 2013). Epitome Pictures appears to exist mainly to produce *Degrassi*, which is further confirmed by the fact that its founder and CEO is Linda Schuyler, creator and executive producer of *Degrassi*, and its co-founder and President is Stephen Stohn, Schuyler’s partner and executive producer of *Degrassi* (Epitome Pictures, 2013). Schuyler co-created the original *Degrassi* in 1984, and has continued to head the *Degrassi* franchise for the past thirty years (Epitome Pictures, 2013). Stohn is a media and entertainment lawyer as well as executive producer who has been working on *Degrassi* since its return in 2001 (Epitome Pictures, 2013). Both have won numerous awards within Canada

for their contributions to the Canadian arts and entertainment industry (Epitome Pictures, 2013). In addition to Schuyler and Stohn, Brendan Yorke, Sarah Glinski, David Lowe and Stephen Brogan are *Degrassi* producers during Season 10 (Bell Media, 2013).

Degrassi also receives funding from a number of Canadian government and private sources, including the Canadian Media Fund, RBC Royal Bank, the Shaw Rocket Fund, The Independent Production Fund: Mountain Cable Program, the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit, the Ontario Film and TV Tax Credit and the COGECO Program Development Fund (Schuyler, 2011). The particularly Canadian context of *Degrassi* is often cited by US media analysts as the reason for its ability to tell stories that deal with controversial issues in authentic ways that differ from other teen television shows. In the past, certain episodes of *Degrassi* have indeed been modified for broadcast in the US, such as an abortion storyline in the original series (Canadian Press, 2010). In their 2010-2011 report, GLAAD, referring to *Degrassi*'s Adam, stated that "it is telling that the best transgender character on TV...is located on a show imported from Canada, rather than one produced here" (GLAAD, 2011b, 5). Though certainly *Degrassi* does not exist outside of mainstream media, airing on a channel owned by the "largest communications company" in Canada (BCE, 2013), *Degrassi*'s status as a thirty-year-long Canadian television success story does impact its ability to tell stories that have not previously been told.

Transnormativity in televisual representations

In addition to examining the specific location of *Degrassi*'s production, I will now examine the links between processes of normalization and trans* youth on television before proceeding to my critical discourse analysis of Adam's portrayal of transnormativity. As trans* identities become present on television in scripted characters, homonormativity must be expanded upon as a framework for analyzing representations of non-normative sexualities

and gender identities. Homonormativity generally plays out on television as the privileging of cisgender white, upper-middle-class, gender conforming, able-bodied gay male and, to a lesser extent, privileged lesbian identities (Beirne, 2008; Duggan, 2003). In youth, these privileged queer identities are also usually apolitical, desexualized and exist within normative structures of family and friendship (Beirne, 2008; Driver, 2006; Zeller-Jacques, 2012). Almost by definition, trans* youth identities could not be homonormative identities by virtue of their trans*, gender-non-conforming status; the idea that trans* identities could be homonormative also, on some level, engages in a conflation of sexuality with gender identity. This difference does not mean, however, that trans* identities are not grouped categorically with queer identities in analyses of televisual representations. For example, GLAAD's 2010-2011 report on LGBT inclusive hours on television repeatedly noted the lack of transgender representation on television – only 1% of the total number of LGBT inclusive hours on television were trans* inclusive – even on networks who were given otherwise excellent ratings in terms of LGB inclusive representations (GLAAD, 2010b, 4). It is telling that GLAAD accorded ABC Family an excellent rating and many accolades for its high number of LGBT inclusive hours even though there were no transgender representations or trans* inclusive hours: GLAAD qualifies this complete lack of trans* representation as a “sticking point”, but nonetheless gave an excellent rating to the network (GLAAD, 2010b, 4). This discrepancy speaks to the ways in which trans* identities are marginalized in relation to queer identities as well as in relation to cisgender identities, and reinforces the importance of framing analyses of trans* representations within the context of the existence of transphobia (Stryker, 2008).

In avoiding a conflation of gender identity and sexuality, however, I do not wish to deny the existence of queer/gay/lesbian/bisexual trans* identities. I simply want to

emphasize that by consistently grouping non-normative sexualities and non-normative gender identities together in the development of theoretical frameworks, such as homonormativity, the more marginalized identities (in this case, trans* identities) are often subsumed by the less marginalized identities (in this case, queer identities). Useful ways of analyzing queer identities are then presumed to be useful ways of analyzing trans* identities, without appropriate attention being given to the differences between these identities, which similarly speaks to the need to acknowledge transphobia when analyzing trans* identities and experiences.

Acknowledging that transphobia structures televisual representations of trans* identities, however, does not negate the possibility that certain trans* identities can become normalized in relation to other trans* identities, nor the fact that certain trans* identities have recently been deemed acceptable enough for televisual representation. In response to these representational trends, the concept of transnormativity has recently been formulated to describe the social processes at play in representations of trans* identities in mainstream mass media. Rebecca Kern speculates that a normative trans* character would be one who does not disrupt the dominant gender binary, but rather reproduces dominant binary conceptions of gender through “self-expressive gendered practice” (2012, 245). Cael Keegan provides a definition of the “transnormative subject” as it begins to emerge in Western visual culture as “a putatively white, desexualized transgender character with no access to queer politics or community” (2013, 28). He further explains that the effect of this normative representation of trans* identities is that they become seen as able to be “unproblematically folded into heteronormative familial and social structures through a democratic extension of progressive optimism and a re-stabilization of the gender binary” (Keegan, 2013, 28). The concept of transnormativity, borrowed here from Keegan, is defined as the way in which

certain trans* identities gain acceptance into dominant social structures through their maintenance and reinforcement of these dominant structures, such as the gender binary, echoing the ways in which homonormativity functions as the inclusion of certain queer identities into dominant social structures.

As Adam on *Degrassi* represents the first recurring trans* youth main character on television, it is difficult to discern exactly how transnormativity plays out on teen television due to a lack of examples. Borrowing from the literature on homonormativity and drawing upon the emerging literature on transnormativity, I will identify the possible characteristics of a transnormative youth character on television in order to theoretically ground my critical discourse analysis of Adam's portrayal of transnormativity. The character could be white, upper-middle class and able-bodied (Keegan, 2013). The character could be straight and reinforce gender binaries through both their heterosexuality and their identification with normative gender roles, mannerisms and practices (Kern, 2012; Keegan, 2013). They could follow a "classic true transsexual" trajectory based in body dysphoria that has been present and consistent throughout the character's life and that leads them to identify very clearly with one gender (Keegan, 2013). Acceptance by both friends and families could be gained either immediately or eventually, allowing the character's trans* identity to exist clearly within dominant social structures (Keegan, 2013; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Depoliticization and desexualisation could be present in the character's storyline, likely in the form of friendships with cisgender heterosexual characters and, in the case of a romantic storyline, romance would take precedence over sexual or physical affection (Keegan, 2013; Zeller-Jacques, 2011). Overall, a transnormative youth character would likely express a desire to be 'just like' their cisgender peers and view the resolution of their difference as a sign of success. Importantly, Adam's character on *Degrassi* represents an opportunity to clarify the

characteristics of transnormativity, not simply represent them, as well as help formulate the concept of transnormativity more broadly.

Degrassi's Adam Torres: A Critical Discourse Analysis

My critical discourse analysis of Adam's portrayal of transnormativity on *Degrassi* consisted of multiple readings of the televisual text which led to the emergence of key themes. I first watched the tenth season of *Degrassi* in its entirety, transcribing all of Adam's scenes and noting the dialogue, visual image (including the layout of the scene, action, gestures and facial expressions) and sound. I found visual image to be central to Adam's representation of transnormativity, and watched key scenes multiple times in order to note his clothing, gestures, mannerisms and facial expressions and their relation to the dialogue in the scene. I then coded my notes on Adam's scenes and identified five key themes in his narrative: family and friendship, gender binary and masculinity, bullying and violence, the physical body, and likeability (including references to being 'more than' his trans identity). I cross-referenced these themes from the text with the relevant literature on trans* representation in mass media and found many of these themes to be grounded in the literature as well. For example, the theme of a gender binary and dominant masculinity was consistent with Kern's hypothetical trans character that reproduces dominant binary conceptions of gender (2012), and the theme of the physical body was consistent with Keegan's analysis of body dysphoria in recent media representations of trans identities (2013). I coded my notes on Adam's scenes a second time theme by theme to further analyze how these themes fit into Adam's overall narrative. Finally, I coded my notes one last time, looking for overall connections between the themes and noting which key themes and scenes contributed to an overall narrative of transnormativity and which subverted that narrative. For example, I found scenes with references to a gender binary or dominant conceptions of

masculinity to contribute to transnormativity, while scenes with transphobic violence subverted a transnormative narrative. This led to the emergence of the concept of a politicized transnormativity as an overarching narrative for Adam's storyline.

My decision to organize my critical discourse analysis by chronological sections, rather than by key themes, was due to the literature on trans* representations in media that focus on "disguise/deception", "revelation/unveiling", and then an end to the storyline, often through violence or death, as a narrative structure for trans* storylines (Phillips, 2006). I wanted to highlight how contemporary representations of trans characters are similarly structured in terms of "disguise/deception" and "revelation/unveiling" (Phillips, 2006), but that these storylines continue post-revelation. As a result, I organized my critical discourse analysis into four chronological sections: a "disguise/deception" section (Phillips, 2006), a "revelation/unveiling" section (Phillips, 2006), a post-revelation section, and a final romantic relationship storyline. I analyze my key themes within each section as they become relevant in order to demonstrate an overarching narrative of politicized transnormativity.

"Easy, caveman": Meet Adam Torres, a new grade ten student

Adam Torres is introduced to the *Degrassi* audience nine episodes into Season 10 as a grade ten student who has just transferred to Degrassi Community School this school year.¹⁶ Adam's introductory scene quickly establishes a classic trans narrative of "disguise/deception" leading to a "revelation" of one's trans status (Phillips, 2006). Wearing

¹⁶ *Degrassi's* narrative format differs from most shows within the teen television genre. Though a drama, *Degrassi* runs half hour long episodes that represent parts 1 and 2 of a full episode. The first episode, part 1, generally establishes the issue based plot and ends in a cliff hanger, while the second episode, part 2, resolves the issues presented in part 1. *Degrassi* also includes a rotating cast of approximately ten to twelve main characters as well as additional supporting recurring characters. Each two-part episode generally tells the story of two or three main characters. As a result, main characters are not present in each episode. For example, Adam's storyline is a main storyline in Episodes 15, 16, 21, 22, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 42. He also appears in secondary roles in other character's main storylines in Episodes 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 37, 41, 43 and 44. His screen time is relatively consistent with the screen time accorded to other main characters, though there are some characters, such as Adam's best friends Eli and Clare, who receive more screen time than the other main characters.

a knit cap, baggy jeans and an oversized sweatshirt, Adam is immediately portrayed as a friendly, confident, straight, white teenage boy who is noticeably different in a yet-to-be-defined way (Season 10, Episode 9: ‘I Just Don’t Know What To Do With Myself’: Part 1). This difference becomes clear in his introductory scene when the Student Council President, Sav, asks Adam to help him take down speakers after a fundraiser, which Adam and his new friend Eli have just won. Sav hands the speaker to Adam, but the speaker is too heavy and he struggles with it before dropping it onto the taillight of Sav’s dad’s new truck, to which Sav reacts with fury (Season 10, Episode 9: ‘I Just Don’t Know What To Do With Myself’: Part 1). Adam’s physical inability to carry the speaker represents a failed masculinity – or, at the very least, a different masculinity – that he then tries to remedy by making a sexist joke about an ex-girlfriend, which simultaneously positions heterosexuality and sexism as key to successful masculinity. This combination of references to masculinity, heterosexuality and the equating of his difference with his (white, able-bodied) physical body helps set up Adam’s eventual transnormativity.

Adam’s clothing, stances, language and interests continue reinforce his masculinity throughout this “disguise/deception” part of his storyline (Phillips, 2006). Discussing plans to attend a concert in a different city on a school night with Eli and Sav, Adam sits slouched over with his legs apart and tells Sav that they “need [him], man” and then bumps fists with Sav when he agrees to drive them to the concert (Season 10, Episode 10: ‘I Just Don’t Know What To Do With Myself’: Part 2). All of these mannerisms are somewhat exaggerated, not enough to seem out of place, but enough to draw attention to Adam’s performance of dominant masculinity and therefore function as foreshadowing to the revelation of his trans status. On the other hand, the concert also functions as a way to portray Adam as a complex character who will be seen as more than just his trans identity upon revelation by showing

his musical interest and talent, as well as his general ‘likeability’ through his quick establishment of strong friendships and acceptance by peers. Adam’s likeability factor will be the show’s most successful strategy for portraying his trans identity as acceptable, and trans identities as capable of existing, and succeeding, within mainstream social structures. Similarly, his likeability also ensures his eventual transnormative status.

The next few “disguise/deception” episodes leading up to the revelation of Adam’s trans identity continue to cement this likeability and normativity by continuing to portray Adam’s participation in strong, loyal, gender-normative friendships, his desire for a heterosexual relationship and his charming, witty personality, while simultaneously setting up his difference as located in his body (Phillips, 2006). When his now best friend Eli is bullied, Adam stands up for him, wittily mocking the bully, Fitz, and when Fitz retaliates by shoving Adam into lockers, Eli reciprocates by getting in the way of the Fitz’s fist (Season 10, Episode 11: ‘Try Honesty’: Part 1). His actions demonstrate the strength of their friendship, but also its gender-conforming nature: a normative masculine friendship in which they are ready to physically or verbally defend each other’s masculinity. Adam and Eli’s gender-conforming friendship is further secured when Clare, their mutual best friend, tells Adam that he needs to stop Eli from continuing to engage with Fitz and Adam is dismissive, telling her that “maybe [she] should stay out of it”, making it clear to her that friendships between boys come before those with girls (Season 10, Episode 12: ‘Try Honesty’: Part 2). Adam’s privileging attitude toward gender-conforming friendships helps to reinforce a gender binary, as well as demonstrating his successful existence within the social structure of friendship. Adam’s relationship with his brother reinforces heteronormativity in a similar fashion and further demonstrates his successfully normative relationships with friends and family. His brother, Drew, has just broken up with his girlfriend and Adam gives him advice

on how to win her back, telling him “the girl who’s worth it requires an effort” while mockingly calling him a “caveman” for not knowing this in the first place (Season 10, Episode 14: ‘You Don’t Know My Name’: Part 2). Their mocking but supportive banter ensures Adam is seen as successfully existing within familial social structures, as well as potentially setting up heterosexuality as central to successful masculinity.

Adam’s masculinity is not always so successful, however, and his failures continue to generally relate to physical masculinity. In a particularly compelling example, Eli is relaying to Adam a confrontation he had with the bully, saying that he “tried to talk to him and it got personal. As in my personal area” (Season 10, Episode 11: ‘Try Honesty’: Part 1). Adam, extremely confused, responds with “your...locker?”, and Eli, even more confused at Adam’s confusion says that “the guy kneed me. Low blow”, to which Adam, finally understanding, unconvincingly responds “oh man. I...I...hate when that happens. Hurts so bad” (Season 10, Episode 11: ‘Try Honesty’: Part 1). Adam’s exaggerated attempt at relating to Eli’s pain reinforces his difference as located in his body, and by extension his trans identity as located in his body, setting up the “true transsexual” narrative of body dysphoria that will become clear when Adam’s trans status becomes known (Keegan, 2013). At the end of this “disguise/deception” point in his narrative (Phillips, 2006), Adam is established as both appropriately normative in relation to his peers and also possessing a soon-to-be discovered difference on his body: a perfect candidate for transnormative subjecthood, though the cultural work performed by presenting trans* youth identities as acceptable, likeable and normative for youth audiences from the very beginning of Adam’s narrative cannot be ignored. Also worth noting is the fact that Adam’s storylines have only been secondary at this point in the narrative, and his character does not become the focus of an episode until the revelation of his trans status. Despite making an effort to portray Adam as a complex

character who is more than his trans identity, dominant structures of transphobia shape his narrative in such a way that his gender identity remains his defining feature, and the feature most worthy of storytelling.

“How’s the man in the mirror?”: Revelation of a trans identity

The “revelation/unveiling” of Adam’s trans identity takes place over two episodes and clearly demonstrates how transnormativity exists squarely within, rather than outside, this dominant framework of transphobia (Phillips, 2006). Adam’s disclosure of his trans identity in clearly defined terms, with a focus on how he has always known his true gender identity, and substantiating his gender identity with heterosexuality and a history of self-harm as a result of body dysphoria reinforces transnormativity. His friends’ immediate acceptance of his trans identity also demonstrates his ability to continue to exist within normative structures of friendship post-revelation. However, the juxtaposition of this transnormativity with verbal and physical transphobic violence and the expression of political struggles associated with trans identity assures the existence of transphobia is made clear, as well as politicizing Adam’s transnormativity.

Adam’s revelation of his trans identity is framed within the gendered context of a ballroom dancing class, reinforcing a gender binary even as his trans identity ostensibly disrupts it by ensuring that gender is understood as two clear options with specific roles: “gentlemen” lead and “ladies” follow if the dance is to be successful (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). Adam may identify with a gender other than the one assigned to him at birth, but he still exists within this gender binary. Mirror scenes also play a prominent role in this revelation section, the usage of which Keegan qualifies as a “classic transsexual trope” and explains the mirror’s effect of creating “a sympathetic experience of universalized dysphoric affect through which the audience is entreated to understand and

discharge transgender difference” (2013, 22). In other words, mirror scenes visibly locate trans difference in body dysphoria in a way that is relatable and unthreatening to cisgender audiences. Keegan also provides a useful explanation of the way mainstream media texts utilize narratives of body dysphoria to explain trans identities, stating that “transgender difference is commonly reduced to an experience of prescribed affect: the trans body is fashioned as one that ‘feels bad’ – a dysphoric body” (2013, 2). In Adam’s case, mirror scenes and the setting of the ballroom dancing class, along with scenes showing self-harm, normalize his trans identity through this body dysphoria narrative, all while within an omnipresent gender binary.

The audience is introduced to Adam’s trans identity through a conversation between Adam, Drew and their mother while driving to school in a large red SUV. Adam is annoyed with his impending ballroom dance unit in his recreational gym class and asks his mother if she can “talk to [the principal] about transferring [him] to regular gym” and could she “do that like, today” (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). She lets out an exaggerated sigh, rolls her eyes and banters back, “like, no, I can’t because you’re a new student at the school and I think you should just fly under the radar for now, ok?”, while Drew laughs from the backseat at Adam’s apparently non-existent dancing skills (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). She then says that their grandmother is coming to visit later this week, hesitantly asking if “Gracie could join [them] at dinner”, at which point Adam’s face falls and angrily says that “Gracie is gone” (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). His mother asks him to “please just consider it”, but Adam sarcastically responds with “consider me considering no” before slamming the door and leaving (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). This scene achieves much more than the simple introduction of Adam’s trans identity: it ensures that even as his trans identity is

revealed, he remains much more than his gender identity. The witty banter between him and his mother, his brother mocking him and his assertiveness allow the audience to understand the pain and frustration in this scene through enjoyable and relatable family dynamics.

Adam's mother's frustration can also be read not necessarily as directed at his trans identity, but possibly rather at the difficulties she perceives him to be subject to as a result of his trans identity. Her frustration is reminiscent of Sara Ahmed's discussion of parents' feelings towards queer children: "being unhappy at the child's being unhappy", which they imagine is inevitable as a result of their child's queerness (2010, 92). As a result, despite explicitly asking Adam to deny his gender identity, she is portrayed as not wholly transphobic, and as possessing a potential for eventual acceptance of his trans identity.

Three scenes follow that cement Adam's trans difference for the audience and locate that difference within his body. The first is a mirror scene, in which Adam is studying himself at his locker before heading to ballroom dancing class when Eli comes up and asks "How's the man in the mirror? Are you asking him to change his ways?", a joke which makes Adam extremely uncomfortable and confused (Season 10, Episode 15: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 1). Though Eli was simply quoting song lyrics, he does not know that Adam's mother has indeed just asked him to change the man in the mirror. Adam then proceeds to ballroom dancing class, where the teacher tells them to pick dancing partners. Adam asks a classmate, Bianca, to dance and they get into position as the teacher calls out separate directions for the "ladies" and the "gentlemen" and tells them to "get to know [their] partner's body"; Adam then successfully leads an impressed Bianca around the dance floor (Season 10, Episode 15: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 1). While flirting with Bianca after class, Adam's face suddenly freezes, and he runs to his locker, grabbing something before colliding with Clare. The collision forces him to drop what he has in his hands, and it is revealed to be

tampons, which are now all over the floor. When Fitz sees Adam picking up the tampons, Adam blames them on a very confused Clare, who covers for him (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). The use of tampons to validate the audience’s suspicion of Adam’s trans identity clearly links trans identity with the idea of a wrong body. Similarly, the juxtaposition of Adam’s successful performance of masculinity within the context of the ‘male role’ in ballroom dancing being interrupted by the failure of his menstruating body portrays Adam’s body as one that “feels bad” (Keegan, 2013).

The next scene represents an “unveiling” of Adam’s trans identity to the audience through full body shots of Adam staring at himself in the bathroom mirror at home (Phillips, 2006). Wearing baggy jeans and a black undershirt, his hair is wet and slicked back; as this is the first time Adam has been shown without his cap and baggy hoodie, he is truly unveiled to the audience in this scene. Ace bandages lay on the counter, and Adam turns to the side, allowing the audience to see his chest before he begins binding. Drew knocks on the door, saying Adam “took less time to get ready when [he] was a girl”, to which Adam angrily responds that he “was never a girl, idiot” (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). Adam’s clear discomfort at his reflection and insistence that he has always been a boy set up a transnormative narrative that is explicitly confirmed through Adam’s language in the next scene.

At school, Adam sits down across from Eli and Clare and though they do not press him, explains his gender identity with a clarity and confidence that demonstrates his transnormativity, and by extension, makes his gender identity easily understandable for the audience:

Adam: Ok. So. I’m a guy, like, one hundred percent dude. But I was born in a girl’s body. I’m an FTM. Female to male transgender. Questions? Anything, go ahead.

Claire: Does that mean you're gay?

Adam: No, I, I like girls. And since I'm a guy between the ears, that makes me straight. At least, I think so.

Eli: Cool. How long have you known?

Adam: Since I was four, five. I hated wearing dresses and having long hair.

Clare: How do you know you're not a lesbian?

Adam: I just know. (Season 10, Episode 15: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 1)

Adam's use of clear labels, his assertion that he has always known his true gender identity, and his reassurance of heterosexuality as partial substantiation for his trans identity stabilizes and normalizes his trans identity. On the one hand, this ensures the audience sees his trans identity as valid, and creates a space for certain trans identities to be respected and understood by youth audiences. Adam's happiness and relief at Eli and Clare's acceptance and continued friendship is palpable in this scene, gaining Adam an incredibly sympathetic audience. The narrative's explicit separation of gender identity from sexuality is also respectful of Adam's trans identity. On the other hand, Keegan points out that this narrative also represents "the normative path of transgender ideation reflected in medical and psychiatric literature and often imposed upon trans people seeking institutional recognition or resources" and is by no means the only version of trans* identity, or the only authentic trans* identity (2013, 20). Transnormative representations have the potential to become understood as authentic trans* identities, further marginalizing and erasing those trans* identities that do fit into this normative box.

Transnormative identities are not immune to transphobia, however, a reality which is made clear in the conclusion to this episode. When Adam, feeling confident after his conversation with Eli and Clare, flirts with Bianca, she flirts back, putting her hand on his

chest. Adam steps backward, uncomfortable, but Bianca, confused at what she felt, chases after him, grabs his arm and rips open his shirt, revealing his ace-bandaged chest. Her face is disgusted as she yells “what the hell, are you a girl? I’ve seen you freaks on Oprah” (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). This scene represents a violent, non-consensual unveiling of his trans identity, again clearly located in his body; the violence is intensified by Adam’s reaction: looking as though his whole world has ended, he holds his shirt closed over his chest and runs away, visibly scared. Unfortunately, Adam experiences more transphobic violence in the next scene, when Fitz and another bully follow him into the washroom, asking if he “[missed] the sign on the door” (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). Adam says he “just wants to use the washroom”, but they tell him to “whip it out” and when he does not, one of them picks him up over his shoulder and violently throws him out of the washroom and into a glass door (Season 10, Episode 15: ‘My Body Is A Cage’: Part 1). The camera zooms in on Adam’s face for an extended period of time, in which the audiences reads both physical and psychological pain. These scenes of violent transphobia allow Adam’s transnormativity to remain political; his normativity does not shield him from transphobic violence. The catalysts for this transphobic violence, however, ensures his trans identity continues to be read through body dysphoria narratives: Adam’s chest and genitals are not seen by others as appropriate for the way in which he moves through the world, and as a result, are license for violence to be enacted upon him.

Adam’s family very quickly enters back into the picture, reminding the audience his trans identity exists within dominant familial structures. Adam, Drew and their mother are in the principal’s office, where Mrs. Torres is lecturing everyone about the difficulties associated with being trans in high school, while also revealing her own difficulties with Adam’s gender identity:

Mother: Do you know what happens to trans kids in high school?

Adam: Enlighten us.

Mother: Harassment, assault, bullying, or worse. Death threats, Grace...Adam.

Adam: Mom, stop being so dramatic.

Mom: This isn't me. These are the facts. (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2)

Similar to the scene in the SUV, Adam's mother's inability to respect his gender identity is portrayed as rooted in concern for his safety and well-being, and therefore not inherently transphobic. Though Mrs. Torres may not have accepted Adam's trans identity yet, her love and support for him is not questioned. Adam's wit and sarcasm in light of his mother's grave vision of his future allows the audience to read this scene as a commonplace argument between a teenager and a parent. Adam and his mother could be arguing about a curfew or failing a test rather than the respect of his gender identity. This both trivializes and normalizes trans identity, but also ensures Adam's character remains likeable and sympathetic. This explicit discussion of the ways in which transphobia manifests in a high school setting is also very political. Adam's character may be normalized, but he certainly remains at least tangentially connected to political struggles, which is confirmed in the next scene when the "LGBT advisor" walks Adam to class to ensure his safety (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2).

Adam then returns to ballroom dancing class, where along with rebuffing transphobic threats of violence from Bianca, he is given another opportunity to demonstrate that his trans identity exists within a gender binary. Since Bianca has refused to dance with Adam, the teacher tells him there is an odd number of students and hesitantly asks if he would partner with him (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2). Adam's face makes it clear

that dancing with a man would be a denial of his gender identity, and by extension, masculinity, and says his ankle hurts. The camera pans to the teacher dancing with Bianca instead, a successful performance of a heteronormative gender binary, from which Adam is momentarily excluded even as he refuses to disrupt it. Adam experiences further exclusion after school, this time from his family, while he and his mother shop for a shirt to wear to dinner with his grandmother, and she tells him if he won't attend as Gracie, then he shouldn't at all because she "[wants] to have a nice family dinner" (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2).

A surprise to everyone, and a source of great happiness to his mother, Adam then shows up to dinner as Gracie, visibly uncomfortable and on the verge of tears the whole time. Adam also appears as Gracie in ballroom dancing class the next morning, and when the teacher says he is welcome to sit out again, Adam says he will dance with the teacher for his evaluation. Adam, as Gracie, dances with the teacher, this time in the 'female' role, again reinforcing the idea of a gender binary with only two clear options. After class, Clare finds Adam about to cut himself with his hair barrette and notices multiple scars on Adam's arm. Adam, crying, says that when he "was her, [he] used to burn [himself]. That's how [he] let the anger out" but he needs to be her for the sake of his family (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2). Clare reassures him that he "doesn't have to change who [he is] – everyone else does" (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2). This portrayal of a past history of self-harm as a result of body dysphoria adds to privileged medical and psychological model of trans identity narrative Keegan describes earlier, which normalizes Adam's identity but also, again, provides a venue for understanding trans* identities for a youth audience through shared or sympathetic experiences (Keegan, 2013).

Gracie's brief return functions as the resolution to Adam's "revelation" of his trans identity storyline (Phillips, 2006). Adam meets his mother after school as his regular self and asks her if she sees him as a boy or a girl, and when she reluctantly answers that she sees him as a girl, he clearly tells her that he "said bye to Gracie a long time ago. But [she] hasn't, and that sucks" and that he "was never happy" as Gracie (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2). This final conversation between the two of them not only stabilizes his trans identity, but also centers familial acceptance as key to this stabilization:

Mother: I just don't understand.

Adam: You don't have to. Just accept-

Mother: Accept what, that your life is going to be hard?

Adam: Mom, it's hardest when I'm Gracie. If I'm going to get through it, I need you to see me as Adam, your son. You need to put Gracie to rest. (Season 10, Episode 16: 'My Body Is A Cage': Part 2)

The final scene of this episode confirms that familial acceptance is indeed in the cards for Adam, as he, Eli, Clare, Drew and his parents throw Gracie's clothes in a bonfire and everyone stands around as Gracie is put to rest. The scene is a happy ending to the transphobic violence and disrespect of his gender identity Adam has experienced in the last two episodes, and proves to the audience that trans difference can be resolved, provided, perhaps, that it is normative. The combination of transphobia and transnormativity in these "revelation" episodes ensures that Adam remains likeable and sympathetic to the audience as his trans identity is revealed and stabilized: Adam is different, but different in a way that makes the audience root for him, and is ultimately resolvable.

“Guys don’t do this to each other”: Negotiating high school while trans

Following this revelation and stabilization of Adam’s trans identity, rather than ignoring his trans status, *Degrassi* continues to explore Adam’s gender identity as he negotiates high school, friendships, relationships and transphobia. As trans* characters have traditionally been written out of the narrative post-revelation of their trans* identity, often through violence or death (Phillips, 2006), *Degrassi* subverts media representations of trans* identities by respecting Adam’s gender identity without portraying it as a non-issue. Adam continues to be represented as transnormative through the portrayal of his strong friendships, diverse interests and talents, as well as his continued references to dominant masculinity, while simultaneously remaining politicized and subjected to transphobia. Post-revelation, the links between dominant conceptions of masculinity and his friendships, relationships and interests become much clearer. As a result, Adam’s narrative in this section suggests that transnormative subjecthood is dependent upon heterosexuality, and a subscription to dominant masculinity and a gender binary, highlighting the exclusionary potential of transnormativity.

Adam, with shorter hair, a different cap and slightly less baggy clothes, is starting to feel like a “third wheel” now that his two best friends Eli and Clare are dating, but his loyal friend status is highlighted when he listens to both of them talk to him about their feelings for the other (Season 10, Episode 19: ‘Still Fighting’: Part 2). However, it quickly becomes clear that his frustration with Eli and Clare dating is rooted in his privileging of male friendships: he is upset at the loss of his friendship with Eli, not Clare. When Adam excitedly tells Eli about the mixed-martial arts video he has acquired for their “guys night” and Eli says he has to cancel, Adam asks “why do guys always ditch their friends the second they get a new girlfriend?” (Season 10, Episode 21: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 1). Eli says he just needs to study, but

when Adam finds him on a date with Clare, he gets upset, saying that “guys don’t do this to each other” and then retaliates by mocking Eli’s masculinity with, incredulously, Fitz, referring to Eli’s “guyliner” and calling him “emotional” (Season 10, Episode 21: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 1). Fitz and Adam further bond over their shared interest in boxing and sparring, but their new friendship quickly spirals downward after Fitz invites Bianca to spar with Adam because “no guy’s going to hit a girl” (Season 10, Episode 22: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 2). Adam, upset, reiterates that he is not a girl, kicks Fitz, hard, and tells him to meet after school for a fight. The impending fight functions as a reconciliation for Eli and Adam: Eli decides to join Adam even though Claire does not approve, saying that she “doesn’t get guys” and that he needs to “stand up for [his] bud”, reinforcing a gender binary as well as Adam’s gender identity against Fitz’s transphobia (Season 10, Episode 22: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 2). The privileging of Adam and Eli’s friendship through an association with dominant masculinity ensures Adam’s status as transnormative, but also protects him from the very real transphobia he is experiencing while negotiating high school.

Adam’s choice of extracurricular activities also speaks to his transnormative status through a similar privileging of activities traditionally associated with dominant masculinity, as well as depicting aspects of his identity other than his gender identity. In addition to his musical interests that were established earlier, we learn Adam also enjoys reading comics: Claire threatens to damage one of Adam’s “limited edition” comics in order to get Adam to reveal Eli’s address; Adam acquiesces (Season 10, Episode 20: ‘Still Fighting’: Part 2). Adam is also shown working out at the gym, lifting weights and boxing, and is thrilled when Fitz agrees to let him join his “fight club”, further demonstrating his masculinity through his knowledge of the “rules of fight club” (Season 10, Episode 22: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 2). Though fight club quickly turns into a transphobic space, this storyline also allows Adam to

explain that he “can fight his own battles” and demonstrate his physical strength when he subsequently attacks Fitz in the hallway (Season 10, Episode 22: ‘Purple Pills’: Part 2). Adam joins the Science Olympics Club as well, where he proves he is intelligent and academically inclined, though he decides not to become captain of the club because he “doesn’t need any more eyes on [him] than necessary”, referencing the existence of transphobic barriers (Season 10, Episode 25: ‘Don’t Let Me Get Me: Part 1). Outside of school, Adam goes hunting with Eli and his dad, and while Eli is disinterested and tries to call Claire the whole time, Adam enjoys himself (Season 10, Episode 42: ‘Drop The World’: Part 2). All of these activities – reading comics, working out, fighting, science, hunting – are considered traditionally masculine to an almost exaggerated degree, and ensure that Adam is, firstly, read as masculine, and secondly, read as normatively masculine, despite what might be suggested by transphobic peers. Adam also explicitly reinforces a version of masculinity that fits clearly within the dominant gender binary when Claire complains about Eli being too protective and he tells her that “behind the face of even the sweetest, most emo guy in the world lurks a caveman. Protecting you is like, his way of saying he cares or whatever” (Season 10, Episode 37: ‘Jesus, etc.’: Part 1). Adam’s friendships, interests and personal understandings of masculinity all reinforce heteronormative gender binaries and cement his status as transnormative, while simultaneously helping to ensure his gender identity is respected.

“A charming prince to sweep you off your feet”: Love, relationships and gender identity

The final section of Adam’s storyline has him engaging in the ultimate of masculine interests – girls – and it is through his desire for the normatively feminine Fiona, deemed by Drew to be the “hottest girl in school” that ultimately allows him to prove his heteronormative masculinity, and by extension, transnormativity (Season 10, Episode 30:

‘Umbrella’: Part 2). Adam’s relationship with Fiona also reiterates trans difference as located in the body and reminds the audience of Adam’s sympathetic “dysphoric body” (Keegan, 2013), as he remains both transnormative and politicized. Unfortunately, *Degrassi* also uses Adam’s trans identity to establish a cisgender queer storyline, marginalizing trans identities even while trying to respect them.

Adam and Drew meet Fiona when she agrees to help them with the food drive their mother has them organizing; both are smitten with her immediately. Adam charms Fiona, telling her she should have “a princess carriage...with five horses and a charming prince to sweep [her] off [her] feet”, and though he is pleasantly surprised by her apparent interest in him, he prioritizes his identity as a brother and convinces her to go on a date with Drew instead (Season 10, Episode 29: ‘Umbrella’: Part 1). When Fiona tells him to tell Drew that she is “not looking for anything physical” or sexual, however, Adam changes his mind and argues with Drew about who should date her:

Drew: You’re kidding, right? You like her?

Adam: You like her! Why is it so crazy if I like her too?

Drew: Adam, let’s be serious. Fiona is the hottest girl in school. Why would she go for a guy like you?

Adam: Yeah, why not?

Drew: You know why!

Adam: Tell me what you’re thinking. Go ahead. Say it. Why would a girl like Fiona never go out with a guy like me?

Drew: Because physically, you’re not a girl! (Season 10, Episode 30: ‘Umbrella’: Part 2)

Drew's comments denote transphobia by suggesting trans bodies are not desirable and equate gender to one's physical body, but Adam's direct confrontation of Drew's transphobic comments is a refusal to be desexualized and politicizes his character even as his trans identity is being defined solely by his dysphoric body. Adam's appropriately normative identity, however, exists within dominant familial structures, and Drew ends up apologizing by setting up Adam and Fiona. As Adam begins to pursue Fiona, Adam's friends also, somewhat inexplicably, define his trans identity in relation to his body, asking if Fiona is "aware of his situation" and saying he is "missing some parts" (Season 10, Episode 31: 'Halo': Part 1). Adam rebuffs them as well, saying he hasn't "taken [his] transgender awareness survey lately" and again, his normativity allows him to exist within dominant structures of friendship, and his friends are ultimately supportive (Season 10, Episode 31: 'Halo': Part 1).

Adam demonstrates his charming nature by throwing a party for Fiona after she expresses disappointment at missing the parties in her hometown of New York. When Adam hands her an invitation and she smiles, agreeing to attend, Adam's palpable happiness allows the audience to relate to him and root for him. When Fiona does not show up at the party, his disappointment achieves a similar effect (Season 10, Episode 32: 'Halo': Part 2). Fiona later apologizes and Adam tells her she can make it up to him playing the leading lady to his leading man in the school play, which includes a kiss, and when she agrees, they decide to practice their lines at her condo after school. His friends remind him once again that his difference lies in his body, again trying to desexualize him, but Adam asserts that "if [he] could get her to know the real [Adam] first, then maybe the whole transgender thing wouldn't matter down the line", suggesting that his gender identity is much more than simply his physical body (Season 10, Episode 33: 'When Love Takes Over': Part 1).

The constant reminders of his dysphoric body, however, cause him to stop right before kissing Fiona to tell her that he is “transgender” to which she responds “ok”, and then that she “would rather date [him] than any other guy at school” before spilling the champagne she has been drinking all over his pants (Season 10, Episode 33: ‘When Love Takes Over’: Part 1). Adam’s face registers bewilderment, though it is unclear if this is in reference to her acceptance of his trans identity, her comment about preferring him over other guys specifically or spilling her champagne all over him. In any case, Adam subsequently confidently kisses her and both are clearly very happy, until the next day, when she wants to “pretend it never happened” (Season 10, Episode 33: ‘When Love Takes Over’: Part 1). Adam consults Eli for advice, who suggests that “in wine there is truth” and that Fiona probably does actually like him, so Adam goes back to her condo, where she does indeed invite him in for champagne, dinner and making out (Season 10, Episode 33: ‘When Love Takes Over’: Part 1). Their fun is interrupted, however, by Fiona’s best friend, Holly J, who disapproves of their actions as well as Fiona’s inebriated state, a state which both Fiona and Adam deny. Adam is depicted as so in love with Fiona that he remains oblivious to her drinking. The narrative choice to entwine Fiona’s drinking with her relationship with Adam, however, opens up host of transphobic possibilities that are unfortunately explored.

Adam is thrilled the next day at school, bonding with Eli over “being up late” with Fiona, but his day quickly goes downhill when Fiona shows up drunk to school and tells him that “drinking makes it easier” to be with him (Season 10, Episode 34: ‘When Love Takes Over’: Part 2). She later apologizes and tells him she loves him, a sentiment which he reciprocates, and Adam’s blissful, incredulous expression again ensures his character is likeable even as it becomes clear he is headed more towards tragedy than normativity, a trope historically used to represent trans* identities (Phillips, 2006). When Adam eventually

agrees to help Holly J with an intervention to send Fiona to a rehabilitation centre even though it means losing her, his responsible nature and selflessness contribute both to his normative status as well as his tragic one – he remains likeable, almost flawless, even, but also alone. Fiona returns sober from the rehabilitation centre a month later, apologizes, saying she was drinking because she was afraid Adam would get close to her, not because he is trans, and the two pick up where they left off, making out on her couch. When she puts her hand under his shirt and says she likes how “soft” he is, however, Adam is uncomfortable and says “[he’s] going to get a six pack one day”, to which Fiona says he should not because “it’s better that he’s both” (Season 10, Episode 42: ‘Chasing Pavements’: Part 2). Adam is extremely unsettled and asks “both what?”, but Fiona continues, saying that she “likes that [he’s] the best of both worlds, boyish and girlish” (Season 10, Episode 42: ‘Chasing Pavements’: Part 2). Adam angrily reiterates that he is not a girl, and asks Fiona if she likes him “or the fact that [he’s] stuck in a stupid girl’s body” (Season 10, Episode 42: ‘Chasing Pavements’: Part 2). When Fiona admits she likes both him and his body, Adam yells that she is “using him” and that she wants a girl before storming out (Season 10, Episode 42: ‘Chasing Pavements’: Part 2).

This scene speaks volumes to the relationship between desexualisation and transnormativity, as well as transnormativity’s existence within dominant structures of transphobia. Adam’s gender identity is ultimately respected in this scene in that he refuses to allow Fiona define his identity or his body in terms of femininity; his accusation of her “using him” functions as an assertion to the audience that it is not appropriate for her to disrespect his gender identity. The fact that her attraction to him, however, lies in this disrespect of his gender identity suggests that desexualisation is necessary to ensure the respect of trans identities, and by extension, that desexualisation is key to transnormativity

(Keegan, 2013). Adam's description of his body as a "stupid girl's body" is an explicit self-identification with body dysphoria: Adam's body clearly "feels bad" in this moment (Keegan, 2013, 2). Though desexualisation and body dysphoria narratives both contribute to transnormative subjecthood, this subjecthood clearly exists within structure of transphobia, on more than one level. Adam makes it clear that Fiona is using him in this scene, but *Degrassi* is using Adam as well. Adam's storyline with Fiona begins from his point of view: he is falling in love for the first time, pursuing his love interest, engaging in physical affection, as well as negotiating his trans identity within the context of a romantic relationship. Adam ends up becoming a secondary character in his own storyline, however, as their relationship is used firstly to tell the story of Fiona's alcoholism, and secondly, her coming out as a lesbian. Adam's relationship with Fiona is his last storyline of the season, but Fiona goes on to come out to her friends and family and establish her own queer storyline. This use of Adam's trans identity to establish a cisgender queer storyline further marginalizes trans identities, this time in relation to cisgender queer identities, which firmly secures Adam's identity within the constraints of transphobia.

At the end of this season of *Degrassi*, Adam's character has ultimately been established as embodying transnormativity, from the "disguise/deception" section of his storyline (Phillips, 2006), to the "revelation/unveiling" section (Phillips, 2006), to the post-revelation section in which he negotiates high school, friendships and bullies, and in the final romantic relationship section. In respecting Adam's gender identity throughout the entire season with a sustained storyline that neither portrays his trans identity as a non-issue nor as inevitably tragic, his character marks a milestone in the teen television genre. Additionally, despite being represented as appropriately transnormative through strong friendships and family relationships, heterosexuality, identification with dominant masculinity and a gender

binary, and narratives of body dysphoria that ultimately desexualize him, transphobia is still very much present in Adam's world. His ability to name and confront this transphobia, such as in his final scene with Fiona, or earlier in his storyline with his family, allows him to remain political. Transnormativity and transphobia are therefore simultaneously maintained throughout his narrative, and though transnormativity is ultimately the dominant narrative, it exists firmly within structures of transphobia. This politicized transnormativity Adam represents creates a new framework for understanding youth trans* identities and for youth audiences to engage with non-normative gender identities.

Youth engagement with Degrassi's Adam and trans identity in online communities*

Discussions surrounding Adam's trans identity in *Degrassi's* online youth communities further elucidate the concept of transnormativity and the cultural work made possible by Adam's representation of a transnormative identity. By portraying Adam an extremely likeable and sympathetic character – and, by extension, transnormative – *Degrassi* has created a space for youth to learn about, discuss and engage with trans* youth identities. The comments on four episodes (Episode 15: 'My Body is A Cage': Part 1; Episode 16: 'My Body is A Cage': Part 2; Episode 33: 'When Love Takes Over': Part 1; Episode 34: 'When Love Takes Over': Part 2) on the blog 'Kary's Degrassi Blog: Your #1 Degrassi News Source' demonstrate the ways in which Adam's character helps create new frameworks for understanding gender identity, namely the inclusion of trans* identities. The blog 'Kary's Degrassi Blog: Your #1 Degrassi News Source', which posts frequently about *Degrassi* news, interviews with *Degrassi* producers, and recaps each episode, was chosen due to its popularity among youth *Degrassi* viewers and high volume of comments, for example, the post recapping Episode 15: 'My Body is A Cage': Part 1 had 600 comments from youth viewers. Though a few commenters engaging in these discussions self-identified as trans*

youth, it appears most commenters identified as cisgender, whether through self-identification or through the ways in which they engaged with Adam's character, for example, commenters saying that Adam represented their first exposure to trans* identities.

The comments on Episodes 15 and 16, in which Adam's trans identity is revealed and reactions from friends, family and peers range from immediate acceptance to transphobic violence demonstrates the extent to which youth create affective relationships with Adam's character. Many of the narratives that *Degrassi* has used to create Adam's transnormative subjecthood, such as the establishment of strong friendships, centering his family relationships, 'relatable' body dysphoria, and heterosexuality are present in the comment section. The way in which these narratives create a trans* character that the audience wants to root for – a character who is likeable, relatable and even loveable – becomes very clear, illustrating the cultural work that can be done by transnormative representations, despite their potential for excluding other trans* identities (Degrassi blog, 2010a).

Comments regarding Adam's storyline in this episode are overwhelmingly positive: commenters thought this was the best episode of the season, found Adam to be their favourite character and found his storyline to elicit much emotion. Many spoke to the fact that they cried while watching this storyline, specifically in reference to Adam's body dysphoria. Keegan's concept of a "universalized dysphoric affect" created by narratives of body dysphoria came to life as multiple commenters weighed in on how much they related to Adam's body that "feels bad" (2013, 2). Specifically, many mentioned that they also had histories of self-harm and Adam's manifestation of his body dysphoria through self-harm helped them to understand his pain and relationship to his body. Some mentioned that they had not previously understood trans* identities, but after seeing how uncomfortable Adam was as Gracie, they now understood the importance of respecting trans* identities. In

general, commenters viewed characters who accepted Adam's trans identity favourably, such as Drew, Eli and Clare, and were unhappy with characters such as Bianca, Fitz and Adam's mother, whom they viewed as not accepting him. Narratives of friendship and family relationships also resonated with commenters: many commented on how their opinion of Drew had risen after seeing how supportive he was of his brother; similarly, many commented on how much they enjoyed watching Eli and Clare's friendship with Adam. Many considered the future of Adam's storyline, hoping that he would soon have a romantic relationship and speculated as to his future girlfriend, solidifying heterosexuality's place in transnormative narratives (Degrassi blog, 2010a; Degrassi blog, 2010b).

Interactions between commenters also demonstrate how Adam's character creates online spaces for learning, discussion and education about trans* identities. Some commenters were honest about the fact that they had never met people who identified as trans*, did not know that transpeople exist or did not know that transphobia exists, and that Adam's character taught them about trans* identities. When commenters misgendered Adam, using female pronouns or referring to him as a girl, other commenters were quick to engage in polite discussion about the importance of respecting pronouns and gender identities, and how not doing so is offensive and disrespectful. Commenters engaged in open and respectful dialogue about gender identity and approached each other with understanding and a seemingly genuine interest in learning about trans* identities. For example, when a commenter inquired as to Adam's "real name", one commenter answered with Gracie, and then another explained that his real name is, in fact, Adam. Unintentionally transphobic comments were mostly all addressed, and there appeared to be no one defending transphobia in the discussion (Degrassi blog, 2010a; Degrassi blog, 2010b).

Comments on Episodes 33 and 34, in which Adam and Fiona briefly get together as a couple and engage in physical affection before Fiona is sent to a rehabilitation centre for her alcoholism, demonstrate the centrality of heterosexuality to transnormativity while also creating a space for discussions of trans* youth identities in relation to queer youth identities. In general, commenters liked Adam and Fiona as a couple and were disappointed that their relationship did not work out. Many spoke about them as ‘Fadam’, their relationship nickname, talking about how cute they are together, some even linking to ‘Fadam’ fan websites. Interestingly, many were angry at Fiona for what they saw as breaking Adam’s heart and hurting him. Much of the discussion also focused on Fiona’s reasons for hurting Adam, many (possibly based on previews that had already been released) speaking to her impending coming out as a lesbian, and debating whether her queer identity represented the reason why she dated Adam in the first place, or whether it was the reason for their relationship not working out. One discussion pointed out that Fiona’s ambiguous feelings makes sense in the context of her future lesbian identity and reaffirms Adam’s male identity. Overall, however, commenters were rooting for Adam to find happiness, including romantic happiness, and were displeased at his disappointment (Degrassi blog, 2011).

Adam’s popularity with youth in online communities demonstrates the affective potential of transnormativity: commenters not only love and root for Adam’s character, they also accept and find ways to relate to his trans identity. In combination with my critical discourse analysis of Adam’s storyline, youth engagement with Adam’s character in online communities demonstrates how Adam becomes an extremely likeable and sympathetic character as a result of the tensions between transnormativity and transphobia in his narrative. In other words, Adam’s embodiment of politicized transnormativity, including his interactions with supportive friends and family, transphobic bullies and romantic interests,

creates a relatable, loveable character that is then able to do important educational cultural work. Similarly, the specifics aspects of Adam's character and storyline to which youth viewers relate to and root for Adam's character helps to further clarify the characteristics of transnormativity in mainstream media representations. Ultimately, Adam's transnormative identity performs this important cultural through the creation of new frameworks for youth to understand non-normative gender identities by generating nuanced discussions around trans* youth identities, and creating spaces for learning, education and engagement.

Conclusion

As representations of queer and trans* youth become increasingly numerous and diverse within the teen television genre, this thesis set out to understand these new representations in terms of their relationship to the dominant hetero- and homo- normative structures of television. With *Pretty Little Liars*' Emily Fields and *Degrassi*'s Adam Torres as ambassadors of this new cohort of queer and trans* youth, this thesis explores the rich possibilities for meaningful cultural work achieved by these characters through the creation of new frameworks for understanding youth sexuality and gender identity. Specifically, I inquired as to the social processes of normalization that lead to the telling of certain queer and trans* stories at the expense of other queer and trans* stories. In other words, I wanted to celebrate the cultural milestone that the telling of Adam's experiences as a white trans boy and Emily's experiences as a racialized queer girl represents while remaining cognizant that other queer and trans* experiences remain untold. Through a critical discourse analysis of Emily and Adam's storylines and of discussions surrounding their characters in online youth communities, this thesis demonstrates the link between the establishment of strong affective relationships between these characters and youth viewers and the creation of spaces for discussion, education and celebration around queer and trans* youth identities.

Homonormativity and transnormativity – processes by which certain queer and trans* identities come to exist comfortably within dominant heteronormative social structures and are therefore deemed fit for consumption by mainstream audiences – structure these televisual representations of queer and trans* youth identities, and greatly contribute to the establishment of these strong affective relationships.

The fact that Emily and Adam represent normalized queer and trans* identities does not negate the cultural work done by their embodiment of new versions of youth non-

normative sexualities and gender identities. Cultural work can be as simple as the representation of new identities and experiences that resonate with youth: characters to which they can relate and storylines that reflect their own experiences. Emily creates a new framework for youth to engage with queerness by embodying a particular version of queerness that has not previously been represented on television: a young, racialized female queerness that is stable, accepted and an eventual source of happiness and pleasure. She helps make a queer identity accessible for a more diverse population of queer teenage girls by subverting the teen television genre that generally portrays young female queerness as a phase, experimentation, or, at the very least, fluid. Simply by embodying this young, stable racialized female queerness, she subverts this teen television genre that has often portrayed queerness as white and male and therefore creates a space for queerness to be understood as possible for racialized, female identities. Adam likewise creates a new framework for youth to engage with gender identity by embodying, for the first time on teen television, a trans identity. In a genre that previously only ever portrayed cisgender youth, Adam makes trans* identities accessible to youth audiences in general and creates a space for certain trans* youth to potentially see their experiences reflected on television. Adam's explicit distinction between sexuality and gender identity also furthers our understanding of the differences between queer and trans* youth identities in a society that continues to conflate them. More broadly, Emily and Adam also create new frameworks for discussion and education around queer and trans* youth experiences by inciting online discourse, and possibly, offline conversations with peers and family when these queer and trans* identities and experiences are largely ignored in formal education systems.

The three-pronged methodology for this thesis, involving an analysis of the political economy of production of each show, a critical discourse analysis of particular queer and

trans* storylines on each show, and an analysis of comments surrounding these queer and trans* characters and storylines in online youth communities, proved especially useful in ascertaining both the social processes of normalization at play in the production of these representations and the important cultural work that they nonetheless achieve. Analyzing the political economy of production of the shows allowed for an understanding of each show's location within mainstream media and solidified their mainstream status, but also spoke to the specificity of each location. *Pretty Little Liars'* production within Warner Bros. Entertainment, one of the largest production companies in the world, differs from *Degrassi's* production within Epitome Pictures, a small, Canadian production company that produces only one other television show. This exploration of the forces behind their creation and production also grounded the potential for the normalization that queer and trans* youth identities might face within these mainstream spaces.

Critical discourse analyses of Emily and Adam's characters and storylines then allowed for an in-depth understanding of exactly how queer and trans* youth identities continue to be normalized within the teen television genre through an elaboration of strategies for creating homonormative and transnormative subjects. Emily and Adam's narratives were both shown to be amenable to dominant structures of homonormativity, homonationalism and transnormativity, while simultaneously remaining structured by homophobia and transphobia. Analyzing youth engagement with Adam and Emily's characters in online communities, however, demonstrated that their homonormative and transnormative statuses allowed them to achieve meaningful cultural work. By portraying Emily and Adam as relatable and sympathetic characters, these same strategies for normalization and mainstreaming of their identities that were observed in their characterization and storylines helped youth to create strong affective relationships with their

characters. This thesis ultimately demonstrates that imperfect, normalized queer and trans* youth characters do meaningful cultural work by resonating with youth viewers and creating important spaces for discussion, education and celebration of queer and trans* youth identities.

However, processes of normalization of marginalized identities always leave someone out, and by doing so, further marginalize or erase these already marginalized identities. Even as we celebrate the addition of racialized queer girls and white trans boys to the ranks of queer and trans* youth identities represented in teen television, we must recognize the implications of homonormativity and transnormativity in terms of which queer and trans* youth identities gain recognition and, by extension, authenticity. A return to Jasbir Puar's critique of the 'It Gets Better' campaign, wherein she argues that "queer people of colour, trans, genderqueer and gender nonconforming youth, and lesbians" do not necessarily benefit from, and in many cases are excluded from, the campaign's "narrow version" of queerness that is predicated on a cisgender, white, economically privileged, male queer identity (2010), helps us to understand the implications of normalizing queer and trans* identities. If Adam's version of a white, straight, able-bodied male transgender identity becomes synonymous with an authentic trans* identity in the public imagination, what does this mean for trans* youth who are not white, masculine, able-bodied or straight? For youth who do not identify within a male/female gender binary? For trans* youth who do not find acceptance by family and peers? What does Adam's complicity with medical and psychological models of trans difference mean for trans* youth navigating public health systems (Keegan, 2013, 20)? While bringing to light the experiences of certain trans* youth, Adam is also creating a transnormative box in which many youth will not fit.

Similarly, what does Emily's representation of a racialized queer female identity mean for racialized queer youth for whom Emily's experiences are not relatable? For racialized queer youth whose experiences with racism structure their relationships in queer and non-queer spaces? For queer female youth who are gender non-conforming or identify with masculinity? For queer youth who choose not to come out to family or friends but who, perhaps, live "happily queer" lives nonetheless (Ahmed, 2010)? For queer youth whose trajectories of sexuality are not quite so linear or stable? What do these representations mean for homeless queer and trans* youth? For queer and trans* youth for whom life does not, in fact, get better? Their stories are not simply waiting to be told at the next opportunity; rather, they become excluded from the "exceptional class of aspirational gay citizens" for whom teleological trajectories towards queer happiness and success are possible (Puar, 2010). Sara Ahmed, articulating this queer pursuit of happiness, highlights the need to "think more about the relationship between the queer struggle for a bearable life and aspirational hopes for a good life" (2010, 20). A good queer life should not need to be a homonormative life; a good trans* life should not need to be a transnormative life. The meaningful cultural work achieved by Adam and Emily's characters does not negate the necessity for even more diverse representations of queer and trans* youth identities within teen television.

Alternative queer and trans* trajectories that take into account the effects of social structures of privilege, such as racism, sexism, classism and ableism on queer aspirations and center the experiences of marginalized, not privileged, queer and trans* identities would be a welcome addition to current representations of queer and trans* youth in mainstream media.

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