

This research paper will be about how LGBTQ+ community members are being represented in the media, more specifically T.V. and film. In this paper, we will learn about how in the past there has been misrepresentation, I will argue that queer characters can be represented better, and finally, I will shine light on recent examples that have made progress in representing a multitude of queer voices.

INTRODUCTION

In T.V. and film, the characters are just as important as the plot in telling a story. Diversity in T.V. and movies go a long way when it comes to connecting with the viewers. LGBTQ+ representation in storytelling is always a good thing, but there is a thin line that separates good queer storytelling in the media and misrepresentation of queer lives with stereotyping and harmful T.V. tropes. Producers use tactics such as queerbaiting, which is a way to draw queer audiences in with the promise of a queer storyline, however fall short of fulfilling that promise. The use of queerbaiting benefits no one except the producers in gaining more views. In this paper, I will demonstrate the importance of diverse storytelling and point out the danger of a “single story” (A.K.A. stereotypes). Through this analysis on storytelling I would like to answer the question: “How can queer storytelling enter mainstream media in a way that is not damaging real queer lives?”

Firstly, storytelling has always had a special place in my life. It has allowed me to connect with people and it functions as a way to pass on messages and lessons to future generations. Mitch Diktoff wrote in an article in the *HuffPost* titled, “Why Create a Culture of Storytelling?” that talks about how storytelling is used as a tool to help people create bonds with others. He wrote, “When people tell their stories to each other and are heard, magic happens. People bond. Barriers dissolve. Connections are made. Trust increases. Knowledge is transmitted. Wisdom is shared. A common language is birthed. And a deep sense of interdependence is felt.” (Diktoff). In my personal history as an artist, I have been a sort of vessel for other people to tell their stories through filmmaking and art. It is an important part of who I am and what I strive for as an artist, to share stories and ideas with others. I do this not only to tell my own stories but the stories of others as well. While I enjoy being someone who creates and shares, I also love to indulge myself in T.V. shows and movies and feel as if I am a part of those adventures like many others do. It’s easy to imagine oneself in a show, but it’s another thing to actually be represented by a character that allows me and others to be *seen* in today’s media.

To be seen in today’s T.V. and film, we have to get past the practice of a “single story,” which is the reinforcement of stereotypes by only seeing one side of a story. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks more in depth of this in her TedTalk, “The Danger of a Single Story.” She explains in her talk that people are exposed to only one part of a truth, causing misunderstanding between people. An example she gives is that of how when she left her home country to attend university in the U.S., her college roommate was shocked to see Adichie speak fluent English although English is an official language in Nigeria. Adichie’s roommate was only exposed to one side of the African story, one where Africans were poor, could not speak English, and had tribe music. “Single stories” are common in T.V. and movies, especially when it comes to queer characters. The kinds of LGBTQ+ characters being shown on T.V. are stereotypes and they fail to represent a more complex community.

QUEER MISREPRESENTATION

Queer representation in the media has mainly only consisted of harmful stereotypes and T.V. tropes with no variety in characters. From personal experience, I have never encountered a queer character that I can relate to on T.V. Most queer characters that exist in the entertainment industry exist only as background characters or comedic relief. When they are not the comedic relief, they are characters that get killed off or written out of the show. Both of these

tropes are known as “Queer People Are Funny” and “Bury Your Gays.” Along with many more harmful T.V. tropes, there is also a complete misunderstanding of sexuality being presented in T.V.

The first stereotype that I would like to critique is “Queer People Are Funny,” also commonly known as “The Gay Best Friend.” Just as the name implies, this character does not really have any personality other than being a background gay character. This character is also usually white, cisgender, and male. Examples of characters like this are local news reporters, Greg and Terry, from “American Dad!” who are a gay couple whose sole purpose is to provide comedic relief for the majority of their screen time.

In S7:E2, “*Hurricane!*,” Greg and Terry are already the first joke in the episode. Greg is out in the field in the middle of a hurricane, the high winds becoming so strong that Greg gets blown away by the storm. Terry who is at the news station, is watching in horror as his romantic and work partner is in danger. While Greg and Terry served no real purpose in the episode, they still made an appearance. Yes, they were reporting on the hurricane, but to the audience that was already obvious. There was no opening theme song and instead the episode started with big blue text, “HURRICANE!” Viewers of the show can immediately tell that this episode is different from others due to the more dramatic opening. Greg and Terry could have been absent from the episode and the story would not have been different.

Another character that falls under the same trope is Matthew MacDell from the Netflix series “Big Mouth” Matthew is the flamboyant and gossip-crazed gay boy at Bridgeton Middle School. Matthew fits “The Gay Best Friend” character in “Big Mouth” because he is a white, cisgendered male who is only present as a secondary character. Matthew does the morning school announcements and has a flare for knowing all the details about ongoing drama. He is also sassy and mean towards the other students. All of the above character traits feed into the stereotype of gay teens. While Matthew's screen time for Season 1 functions as a secondary comedic relief character, his character begins to develop halfway through Season 2. “Big Mouth” challenges “The Gay best Friend” trope in S2:E8, “*Dark Side of the Boob,*” by showing Matthew's feelings on failing to fit in with his classmates during a big sleepover at the school. The boys refuse to be inclusive because he is gay and the girls want to have “girl talk” with him when he clearly says “Well, I'm not a girl,” (S2:E8, 15:30). Later on in the episode, Matthew retreats in the teacher's lounge because no one wanted him around.

In another episode of “Big Mouth,” the audience gets to see another vulnerable side to Matthew when he interacts with his family. In S3:E3, “*Cellsea,*” Matthew invites Jessi to his house and his demeanor changes while at home, presenting himself differently in front of his family due to not being out to them. He later on tells Jessi that it is easier for him to stay in the closet so he won't be questioned by his parents, primarily his dad. This scene shows the audience a new complexity behind Matthew's character. Matthew is hiding himself, like many do before coming out, in order to not cause a ruckus. It was at this point that I had a better connection to Matthew as an audience member. I find it easier to not come out to my family just so I can simply avoid their questions about my sexuality. This is exactly where “Big Mouth” challenges “The Gay Best Friend” trope more by making Matthew more human, unlike how the trope makes a character lose all personality and arcs to them.

“Big Mouth” and “American Dad!” both showed characters that fit “The Gay Best Friend” T.V. trope, but “Big Mouth” has done a better job at representing queer characters by giving Matthew some more character growth and story arcs centered around him. Matthew

shows vulnerability and allows himself to grow and change whereas Greg and Terry do not have as much of that same character growth in the earlier seasons of “American Dad!” Even though Matthew is a better representation than Greg and Terry are, there are still some big flaws in all three of them. Matthew, Greg, and Terry all are white, cisgendered males who just so happen to be news reporters. That might not sound like it is an issue, but it is. Another element to “The Gay Best Friend” trope is that these characters are into gossip and drama, which the newsreporter directly reinforces. It is another harmful stereotype that T.V. and film has used for characters of the LGBTQ+ community. Matthew does the morning announcements at his Middle School, but his announcements consist of spreading around the news of whatever drama is going on. Greg and Terry are adults and they are mature enough to not spread rumors in their neighborhood, but by making them the local news reporters, there is a subtle nod to the fact that they are still “spreading the news” around. Having all three be news reporters only reinforces stereotypes even when there are moments in the shows that challenge character tropes.

If a character is not being effected by “The Gay Best Friend” trope, then they are probably being effected by the “Bury Your Gays” trope. What that means is when a complex queer character gets killed off in a T.V. show or a movie. Their death may be important to the plot, but usually, when a queer character dies, instead of causing temporary grief in the audience, it causes anger and rage aimed at the producers of the show or movie from fans who looked up to character.

In an article written by Bethonie Butler in *The Washington Post* titled, “T.V. keeps killing off lesbian characters. The fans of one show have revolted,” Butler talks about the death of a lesbian character, Lexa, from “The 100.” Butler speaks about how “The 100” was a progressive show with its inclusiveness in its characters, so when Lexa’s death came it felt like betrayal. As stated by Butler, Lexa’s death was sudden and the way she died was what got viewers of the show upset, “[But] fans are decrying the show for the way Lexa was killed: by a stray bullet meant for the woman she loved, Clarke, right after they consummated their relationship. Part of the ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope is that lesbians are often killed after joyous events — declarations of love, and even marriage. The shooter did target Clarke because of her sexual orientation, but wanted her relationship with Lexa to end because it distracted Lexa from her leadership duties in the war” (Butler).

Butler notes that after the death of Lexa, fans took to Twitter to voice their thoughts on the many shows that have killed off characters. The tag that twitter users used included “Bury tropes, not us” and “CallOutTheCW” due to *The CW’s* history of not treating LGBTQ+ characters better in their productions. On the website *LGBT Fans Deserve Better*, there are tabs about the different kinds of LGBTQ+ tropes used in television and “Bury Your Gays” has a list of characters that are deceased or have been written out of the show, along with who they were, their sexualities, and their role in the show. There was a total of 146 characters on the list. The website also lists how they died and other details about them in the show regarding relationships they have had in the show. Every single character on that list is female, either lesbian or bisexual.

Female characters face a lot of sexism in T.V. and film. Especially with what are still subtle tropes that are being used such as the ones mentioned by *Digital Spy* in one of their articles, “7 sexist T.V. and movie stereotypes that men still don't notice.” In T.V. and film, women are portrayed in a way that is not realistic, and women’s sexuality suffers that kind of misunderstanding all the time. Often female characters are written and directed through the “male gaze.” What that means is that women in T.V. and film are being depicted as sexual

objects through the eyes of men. “Male gaze” is why female superheroes wear revealing costumes and why “lesbianism” in T.V. is over-sexualized.

The 2013 French film, “Blue Is The Warmest Color,” written and directed by Abdellatif Kechiche is one of those movies that underwent the “male gaze.” The three hour-long movie won many awards but is very controversial for how it presented female sexuality. The story follows the relationship of Adèle, a high school student discovering her sexuality upon meeting Emma, a slightly older art student with blue hair. The two girls date each other and the movie shows their relationship grow and go through hardships as the years go by. Movie critics were mostly torn by different elements. But many said that the movie was a masterpiece and showed a real, raw relationship between two women. Other critics say that anyone who has loved would relate to the story, no matter if the relationship was heterosexual or homosexual. While many did enjoy the movie, the issues with “Blue is the Warmest Color” align with the grueling sex scenes.

Halfway through the movie there is an overtly long sex scene between Emma and Adèle. The scene itself lasts 7 minutes and is extremely graphic. Reports online say that the actresses were wearing prosthetic vaginas that were shaped out of their own vaginas. This was done so that way there was a barrier between their real vaginas. With that, they were technically not having real sex, but it’s difficult to wrap your head around it. It was “simulated” sex, but it is honestly hard to tell the first time watching it through. Filming that scene also took them 10 days to shoot. It was unchoreographed, Kechiche telling the actresses to just do something with each other. There are so many elements in the filming process that make it all sound very uncomfortable, and watching the scene is discomfiting as well. Watching the movie on Netflix, I could skip ahead and past those sex scenes, but watching it in the movie theater there is no way of avoiding them.

The seven minute sex scene is very problematic in many ways beyond the filming process. My biggest issue with the scene is that it was seven minutes long. That is an insane amount of time to be showing the lead actresses rubbing up against each other. While in other shows and movies, sex scenes last between less than a minute to possibly two minutes. The scenes are short to not cause discomfort for both the audience and actors. Some productions do not even show the characters having sex. Instead what they do is show a montage of them rustling around in bed, implying that the characters are having sex, and then showing them lying there calmly once its done. Other T.V. shows and movies might even just cut from the before and after. That is enough to get the point across, but “Blue is the Warmest Color” really pushed far. Notably in other shorter scenes, the sex is heterosexual. However, when it’s a homosexual sex scene, it gets treated as a fetish. “Blue is the Warmest Color” suffered through that “male gaze” to provide pleasure for the men watching.

Another misrepresentation of lesbianism comes from the 2004 series, “The L Word,” from *Showtime*. With a primarily female cast, the show follows a group of friends who are all lesbians or bisexuals. While the show strived to represent queer culture, it still perpetuated problematic scenes and character tropes throughout the show. In S1:E2, “*Pilot: Part 2*”, Tina and Bette have been struggling to have a baby and find the right sperm donor to get Tina pregnant, the pressure of the baby interfering with their sex life. When the couple is being flirted with by a dude at one of Bette’s presentations for work, the couple plot to have a threesome with the guy to get Tina pregnant. Throughout the first and second episode alone, Tina and Bette have both voiced their thoughts on their sexuality and how they feel about having sex with a man, “God, it’s repugnant. I can’t believe I used to swallow that [male cum] stuff,” (Bette, S1: E1, “*Pilot:*

Part I). The act of a lesbian having sex with a man in a T.V. show or movie is another unhealthy T.V. trope called “Lesbian With A Man.” This trope is where a lesbian character is displayed with a man either in a romantic relationship or in a graphic sex scene. This character is also depicted enjoying her time with this guy even though it does not align with her sexuality at all.

A few of the reasons why lesbians would have sex with men in a T.V. show or a movie are because they are having doubts about their sexuality, because of sexual assault, or because they want to get pregnant. Tina and Bette invite the man that was flirting with the both of them to their home for their threesome. Before walking into their home though, the couple is nervous, causing Bette to reassure Tina by saying, “Just look at me, ok?” Once they go in and start getting ready, the guy finds out that they were just using him for his sperm. He left before they could get any further, but afterwards, Tina and Bette had a sort of sexual reawakening. In the episodes following their “almost-threesome,” Tina and Bette have been having more sex than they have been in the last few years, and they seemed happier after the incident. It was a complete change for the couple, because before they were going to have sex with the stranger, they were very uncomfortable. They didn’t like the idea of having sex with a man, yet the experience of almost doing it bettered their dormant sex life. This is problematic because it reinforces the “Lesbian with a Man” stereotype, as well as implies that sex with a man can be life-changing. A woman’s sexual life is not revolved around males. That is something that just needs to be understood.

“The L Word” also is at fault of mistreating bisexual characters. Known as “Bisexual Erasure,” this T.V. trope is where a character who identifies as bisexual starts to ignore one gender and never mentions their bisexuality again. Often alluded to only once in the show or movie. In S1:E1, “*Pilot: Part I*,” Alice Pieszecki is told off by her friend Dana Fairbanks about “choosing a side” in her sexuality, “Oh, Christ, Alice. When are you going to make up your mind between dick and pussy? And spare us the gory bisexual details, please” (Dana, S1:E1, “*Pilot: Part I*”). Throughout the show Alice does not let people stop her from identifying as bisexual, but she still faces Bi-Erasure throughout the series. Her friends and family who should be supportive of her don’t understand her bisexuality.

Another character that fits “Bisexual Erasure” is Jenny Schecter. Jenny discovers her sexuality in Season 1 of “The L Word.” Jenny moves in with her boyfriend, Tim, in L.A. and meets a woman named Marina, who she would later have an affair with while engaged to Tim. When Jenny ends her relationship with both Tim and Marina, she starts exploring her sexuality more. She identifies as bisexual and becomes friends with the other characters in the show. In S1:E14, “*Limb from Limb*,” Jenny goes on her first date with a guy, after being dumped, named Gene Fienberg. They start to have sex, but halfway through, Jenny starts crying. The morning afterwards Gene and Jenny talked about Jenny’s sexuality, saying, “Maybe you don’t want to be with guys.” Jenny responds by saying that she still likes men and that she likes Gene. In the same episode though, Tim confronts Jenny about her dating other men. When Jenny tells Tim that they are getting a divorce, Tim yells, “Because you fell in love with another woman! [...] You were supposedly in love with me. You swore that if you were ever going to be with a man again, I was the man you were going to be with... The *only* man,” (Tim, S1:E14, “*Limb from Limb*”). Tim is invalidating Jenny’s sexuality and free will in this scene by telling her that she is not allowed to see other men that were not him. By this point in the series, Tim had been seeing other people as well, so for Tim to limit Jenny in her dating life was troublesome. That is only part of the mistreatment Jenny gets for being bisexual.

In S2:E1, “*Life, Loss, Leaving*,” Gene gets upset at Jenny while they are at a farmers market near the beginning of the episode. Gene catches Jenny eyeing the other women at the market and he feels threatened. He snaps when a completely innocent interaction between Jenny and a saleswoman put him on edge. Jenny pulled him aside to ask him what is wrong, and he clearly states what his problem is, “I like you too... but we don’t have sex. Okay? There it is. I’d like to be having sex with the woman I cook for, make mixtapes for you—You don’t want to have sex, and I know why. It’s because you’re gay, all right? That’s it. I’m sorry to break it to you, but you are a girl-loving, full-on lesbian,” (Gene, S2:E1, “*Life, Loss, Leaving*”). Jenny tells him that her sexuality is not for him to decide, but he decides to leave her anyways. Being told what her sexuality is eventually leads her to her eventual break up with Max in Season 4. Max is a transgender male character who gets introduced in Season 3 as Moira. Jenny completely supports Max’s transition and coming out, but in S4:E1, “*Legend in the Making*,” Jenny breaks up with Max, “[Because] you identify as a straight man. So there’s the mismatch. Because you want me to be your straight girlfriend to your straight guy, and I identify as a lesbian who likes to fuck girls, and you’re not a girl,” (Jenny, S4:E1, “*Legend in the Making*”). Jenny’s bisexuality was erased from the show from that point forwards. While sexuality is indeed fluid and is not a bad thing, for an established bisexual character to deny their bisexuality in a T.V. show or movie is the reinforcement of “Bisexual Erasure” in T.V.

POSITIVE QUEER REPRESENTATION

From stereotypical white flamboyant gay guys to dead bisexual and lesbian women on T.V., looking past all the misrepresentation and the bad examples of what is LGBTQ+ T.V., there are some shows and movies that tell a wider variety of stories and that do not fail to represent. Queer storytelling in the media is changing, and there are more characters that viewers can see a part of themselves in and can relate to. Characters like Chiron Harris from “*Moonlight*” and Elena Alvarez from “*One Day at a Time (2017)*” show more diverse queer stories from that of the stereotypical ones and depict the lives of queer people of color.

Movies like “*Blackbird*” (2014) and award-winning film, “*Moonlight*” (2016) show the lives of queer black kids growing up. In “*Moonlight*” you follow the story of Chiron Harris throughout his life as a queer black kid growing up in the ghetto. As the audience, you watch Chiron go through different phases of his life, from child to teenager to adult. Through every period in his life, he undergoes a transformation and slowly but surely comes to accept himself. The movie was catered for a specific audience that can relate to one or more of the main themes of the movie: toxic masculinity, queerness, and poverty. Movie critics and reviews found on *IMBD* were split between the movie being a masterpiece or a waste of time. But, I would argue that those who called this movie a waste of time did not find a way to relate to the issues presented in the movie. “*Moonlight*” was not meant or made for them. The movie did make an impact within the audiences that it was intended to represent. It showed a different side of the queer story, the one of someone who is not white or privileged.

Before “*Moonlight*” was released in 2016 though, there was another film released that told the story of a black, gay teenager in his own coming of age story. “*Blackbird*”(2014) follows the story of Randy Rousseau and his journey to self-acceptance. Living in an overly religious household with a missing sister, deadbeat dad, and a determined mother, Randy tries to live a normal life. Because of his religious upbringing, he feels conflicted about his queerness. e

believes he is a sinner for having gay dreams and calls them impure and selfish. Randy then finds himself in many situations where people question his sexuality, and Randy tries to convince everyone else (and himself) that he is not gay. As time goes on, Randy becomes more comfortable with his sexuality, letting himself live a happier life while facing the hardships that come with it.

The movie has strong themes of queerness in a religious community and it showcases a different perspective on queer teenagers, especially black, queer teenagers. In this way, it is different to other queer teen movies with white protagonists. In those movies the home life of those characters are usually perfect. In movies like “Blackbird (2014),” you see a family and home life that is dysfunctional. Randy’s home life is complicated because his sister is missing and his dad left. The religious weight in Randy’s life is also important to note, since religion follows him everywhere he goes. What also follows him is his queerness. Randy has a passion for acting, but when he lands roles as gay characters in a school play and in a student film, he starts feeling as though his passion is making him selfish. He continues with his hobbies though, feeling confused about his sexuality when he meets Marshall MacNeil. Marshall is a college student who befriends Randy while working on a student film together. While Randy and Marshall’s relationship grows, Randy finds out more about the people around him.

When some of Randy’s friends deal with an unwanted pregnancy, Randy’s best friend, Efrem, tells Randy that he might have an STD. Randy’s dad then takes the two boys to a clinic to get Efrem checked up. While Efrem is with the doctor, Randy and his dad talk about sexuality. Randy still refuses to say that he is gay, but he finds acceptance with his dad. After the situation, Randy and Marshall get closer, but when Randy and Marshall start to have car sex in front of Randy’s house, his mother catches them in the act. Randy’s mother separates the two boys and she blames Randy’s “sin” for taking away her daughter. For the rest of the night she prays to God to help her son, eventually getting the local priest to come in the following day. Randy starts to believe his homosexuality is a sin again, and he willingly accepts help from the Church. Instead of his gayness being taken away though, Randy finds out his friends dealing with their unwanted pregnancy had committed suicide. The grief of it all brings him back to Marshall to find comfort in all the tragedy.

It is at this point that Randy truly accepts who he is and his relationship with Marshall. He gets the courage to come out to his parents and introduce Marshall to them as his boyfriend. As this is happening, Randy’s younger sister comes back home after being missing for years. Randy’s mom learns that her daughter didn’t go missing because of her son’s homosexuality, and she starts to truly accept Randy and Marshall’s relationship. A movie like “Blackbird (2014)” is revolutionary because of the themes and character development in the story. There are few movies with queer people of color that show depth like “Blackbird (2014)” does. Like “Moonlight,” movie critics were split on this movie being fantastic or boring. Many *IMBD* users say that “Blackbird” (2014) was moving with its story and perspective of queer teenagers of color. Others claim that the movie was not interesting and “a waste of time.” Those critics claimed that they have already seen this story many times before. Similar to critics of “Moonlight,” they did not understand “Blackbird” (2014) because this movie was not made for an audience like them. It was made for those who can relate to the characters, not just Randy. Someone who deals with internal homophobia due to religious beliefs can relate to Randy. Anyone can feel the same fear Efrem had when he encountered getting an STD. People who have lost a child but refuses to give up on that missing child can relate to Randy’s mom.

“Blackbird” (2014) has so many characters with their own paths, not just queer ones, that make the story great.

CONCLUSION

In today’s media, characters are becoming more diverse in their arcs and storylines, but with that diversity there is still a lack of accurate and proper representation. Many queer characters on T.V. and film suffer from being stereotyped with harmful T.V. tropes. These tropes such as “The Gay Best Friend” and “Bury Your Gays” make queer characters into a walking and breathing joke, or not breathing at all. There is a complete misunderstanding of sexuality, especially of lesbians and bisexual women, that is being pushed around with the continuous productions made with the “male gaze.” What we need in T.V. and film are more positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community. Diversity in characters and sexuality is important to show so audience members can feel like they are seen. We need more black queer men and more bisexual mexican women. More lesbians with leadership roles who get to live and more characters who show their vulnerabilities instead of being a gossip-crazed jokester. Yes, we can keep the flamboyant white gay guys, but there is more to the LGBTQ+ community than T.V. and film lets on. This community is large and has many stories to tell; real and raw, not tropes or stereotypes.

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