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WOMEN-LOVING-WOMEN PORTRAYALS IN FICTION,

A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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This critical literature review explores the ways in which scholars have discussed depictions of fictional women-loving women (WLW) in film and on television in the past five years. This study is guided by both sexual script theory and the intersectional perspective. Prior studies of WLW in fiction have largely focused on the areas of homonormativity, race, bisexual-erasure, WLW stereotypes, gender dynamics, WLW communities, and post-modern representation. Earlier research has focused on those areas to the exclusion of giving more attention to exploring the use of queerbaiting in modern storytelling. Future research should include analyses of more recently featured fictional WLW characters and WLW relationships in film and on television in addition to more research on queerbaiting overall.

Devon J. Hensel, MS, PhD, Chair

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Introduction

Storylines in fictional film and television production in the US have not been especially nuanced in their depictions of women-loving women (WLW) characters throughout history (Kohnen 2016). This is largely because, nearly a century ago, producers of films created the organization now known as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which included a set of industry-wide "moral" guidelines known as the Hays Code (Glass 2015). The effects of the Hays Code have varied over time. Women in fiction were once expected to keep at least one foot on the floor while kissing a partner, to prevent audiences from seeing them potentially engaging in sexual acts in bed (Londino 2012). More recently, a fictional woman may be just as likely to be shown onscreen in the throes of passion with a husband or long-term boyfriend as she is likely to be shown in bed with a one-night stand. However, the trajectory of depictions of WLW characters has not been as clear-cut.

At one point, queer characters were not able to be explicitly stated to be queer in movies and on television. They could not verbally declare that they were queer, but they were also not able to be portrayed in unambiguous, healthy same-sex relationships (Noriega 2018). Instead, their identities were implied and were inferred by those audience members who were savvy enough to pick up on the implications. Men-loving men (MLM) characters were often foppish, limp-wristed, and little more than effeminate stereotypes, while WLW characters were often hyper-masculine, cigar-smoking, suit-wearing stereotypes, inasmuch as they were allowed to be shown at all (Russo 1985). Historically WLW depictions have either been used as cautionary tales, such as the fate-worse-than-death horror of being queer in *The Children's Hour* (1961), or as titillation

for a presumed heterosexual male audience, as in Marlene Dietrich wearing a form-fitting suit and kissing another woman while literally in front of an audience in *Morocco* (1930). As time progresses, so does public opinion. In this case, public opinion toward WLW relationships has grown more positive (Fetner 2016). The past fifty years have seen the coming and going of second- and third-wave feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Stonewall riots, as well as the fight for marriage equality and the overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Much has been written academically about portrayals of WLW characters in fiction throughout all of these periods of history. DOMA was struck down in 2013. In the time since, on what aspects of fictional WLW depictions have academics focused their attention? What aspects of WLW depictions have not received quite as much attention in this time?

Women who are romantically and sexually attracted to other women—much like virtually everyone else in Western society—learn about what is considered normal and what is considered abnormal through exposure to media (Pivec 2018). There are clear links between what audiences see in fiction and the ways in which they view themselves and they treat others (Binder and Ward 2016; Gillig et al. 2017; Solomon and Kurtz-Costes 2018). Negative media portrayals can contribute to negative self-esteem and mental illness, while positive media portrayals can improve resilience and social capital (Chomsky and Barclay 2010; Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia 2015). Thanks to homophobia and heterosexism perpetuated through entertainment, with all other things being equal, gender and sexual minorities are far more likely than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts to suffer from stress and mental illness (Meyer and Frost

2013). The ways that various groups are portrayed onscreen make a difference in people's lived experiences.

Gender and sexual minorities have existed in American society and across the world throughout recorded history. However, unlike their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, depictions of gender and sexual minorities in fiction have been far less common. Because many queer young people look to queer characters in different media as role models, the ways in which these characters are portrayed affect the ways these young people view themselves (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011). The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the existing scholarly literature on the topic of WLW depictions in fictional stories, in particular those featured in movies and on television. "WLW" in this context refers to women who are interested in romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women, and this term is distinct from "WSW," which refers to women who have sex with other women and does not concern itself with potential romantic or emotional attachments which may be involved in these relationships as well. "WLW" here includes the women in fiction who label themselves as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and so on. It also includes those characters whose sexual identity is not declared or defined within the original text of the story but is inferred to be WLW by the writer of the journal article being explored. The aim of this critical literal review is to establish the depths to which prior research has gone, to critique the arguments that have been made, and to offer paths for future research to take.

Theoretical Perspective

Depictions of characters in media have been the focus of academic interest many times in the past because there is a clear link between audiences' perceptions of characters to which they are exposed and audiences' beliefs and behaviors toward people they meet in their everyday lives. For all of the studies that exist in this area, a select few seem to be specific to WLW characters. How are WLW portrayed in media? This question has received a bit of attention in academic literature, though this has very often been in the context of studies on queer character as a whole. Many of these studies of portrayals of queer characters "in general" tend to give a significant portion of their attention to men, because the majority of queer characters depicted on television and in movies tend to be MLM characters (Bond 2014). My goal in this critical review of the literature was to highlight those and other gaps in prior studies.

Sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1973) and intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1989) have guided this analysis of existing literature. Cultural scenarios inform beliefs about what is normal or abnormal, what is moral or immoral, what is legal or illegal, and so on. Interpersonal interactions are able to shape these cultural scenarios to a degree, but individuals are heavily influenced by the world around them nonetheless. Media is a powerful piece of the cultural scenario that shapes cultural perceptions (Fiske 2016). Characteristics like race, class, and appearance of people who play heroes and villains respectively in movies guide everyday people's perceptions of who is good and who is bad in real life, especially when one's exposure to people of certain groups is generally limited. This is a large part of why many members of American audiences are more likely to presume that Middle Eastern people are more suspect than others, that

young people drink alcohol and party nonstop, that bisexuals are indecisive and promiscuous, and so on (Callister et al. 2011; Richter 2011; Steuter and Wills 2009).

Since sexual script theory and intersectional theory both emphasize a focus on the interpersonal and cultural forces that shape identity, the next logical step is to turn one's focus to specific messages about WLW characters in media, one of the biggest influential forces on identity across cultures. The aim of this thorough literature review is to discover gaps in recent studies of WLW depictions and to explore those gaps to determine the best ways to fill them.

Methods

Appendix summarizes the methods utilized to conduct this study. This research analyzed WLW depictions in media through a critical review of the literature on the subject. That literature has been sourced from the academic databases SocINDEX and GenderWatch. The searches on these databases included the following terms: "lesbian* AND film*," "lesbian* AND television," "bisexual* AND television," "bisexual AND film*," "queer AND television," and "queer AND film*." Table 1 shows the total number of articles per search, per database. Articles were included that fit within the following criteria: (1) the search terms must be included in the papers' abstracts, (2) the articles must be peer-reviewed, (3) they must have been published between 2013 and 2018, (4) they must have originally been published in English, (5) they must discuss a film or television show that was produced in the United States, and (6) the article must contain three or more sentences in reference to WLW characters or relationships. Based on these criteria, Ellen DeGeneres could have been included in regard to her portrayal of the lesbian character Ellen in the eponymous sitcom, but she would not have been included in relation to her career as an openly lesbian actor, performer, and philanthropist.

The date range of 2013 to 2018 is significant because it marks the five years between the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) being struck down and the beginning of this research. DOMA was a federal law that defined marriage as specifically being between one man and one woman (Hull 2016). One could argue that the overturning of this law was a reflection of public opinion swaying toward becoming more accepting of

queer individuals and queer couples. With this increased acceptance, one might imagine fictional depictions in media would be generally positive, or at least neutral, as well.

Including duplicate articles, the initial search resulted in 263 total articles. The same article appearing across databases or appearing multiple times in the same search accounted for the overwhelming majority of this figure, as more than two-thirds of the total 263 articles were articles that appeared more than once. Duplicates aside, there were 151 distinct articles. Eighteen of those articles were not originally published in English or included discussions of fictional WLW characters whose source material was not produced by a US company. There were also four articles of which I could not obtain a copy in order to conclusively determine whether or not the article matched the rest of the criteria and should be included in this study. These four articles were not available, at no cost to myself, through Gender Watch, SocINDEX, Google Scholar, or the shared library system students are able to access through the Indiana University library.

The one stipulation which led to the exclusion of the most articles was that an article could only be included if it met the above criteria and also included three or more sentences in reference to fictional WLW characters. This specification was important because numerous articles from the database searches were focused almost exclusively on MLM characters or on a perceived subtextual relationship between two male characters. Many of these articles did not mention WLW characters at all. To that end, there were also several articles about transgender characters, whose sexualities were described as heterosexual, MLM, or were not mentioned at all. Finally, there were several articles about WLW actors, musicians, and so on, which focused on the

performers themselves, rather than WLW roles they may have played. Figure 1 shows the percentage of articles that were included and excluded based on these criteria.

Of the 151 distinct articles, 103 articles were excluded because they did not discuss WLW fictional characters in three or more sentences. Even with that stipulation, there were still a few articles which only mentioned WLW characters in passing but were included because they technically met the criteria, such as one article about a perceived romantic relationship between two male protagonists in the television series *Hannibal* (2013) and another article about a polyamorous relationship between two men and a woman in the film *Three* (2010). After using these criteria to narrow down the more than two hundred articles, I was left with 29 articles to critically analyze. The articles were then categorized into four groupings, based on themes present in the articles: homonormativity and race, bi-erasure and WLW stereotypes, gender dynamics and WLW communities, and post-modern representation. However, there was a bit of overlap in the classification of articles because, like films sometimes blur multiple genres, discussions of films sometimes call upon multiple elements as well. Some articles fit fairly well into one of the four categories, while others incorporated elements of two or three of them. Table 2 shows the classifications of the analyzed articles into the four categories.

Results

Homonormativity and Race

One of the most ubiquitous tropes in the included articles—discussed in ten of the twenty-nine articles—is homonormativity, or the cultural expectation that same-sex couples will be monogamous, raise children, pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and display many of the other so-called "American values" that align with heteronormative expectations (Kennedy 2014). Some articles critique the way homonormativity is shown in certain movies and television shows. *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) has been lauded by several scholars for being the first mainstream American movie to center around a same-sex couple and their children. Articles about the film focus on how the movie "reinforce[s] the dominant patriarchal order and male mythology" (Howard 2013) while at the same time upholding the committed, monogamous family as the ideal. Kennedy (2014) in particular argues that, while promoting the main family as flawed but well-meaning and in portraying interloper Paul as a charming scalawag, the film does more to present itself as a universal narrative than it does to challenge heterosexism or what it means to be a family.

Critiques like these offer meaningful commentary on seemingly fresh, thought-provoking stories that do little-to-nothing in terms of actually criticizing the dominant patriarchal culture. However, they do fall short in some ways as well. Kennedy points out that *The Kids Are All Right* sets itself up as a film that will interrogate what it means to be a family and to be in a long-term committed relationship. However, she argues that the main couple, Nic and Jules, are more accessible to a mainstream audience than they otherwise may have been because they are white, physically attractive, reasonably

wealthy women whose relationship is disrupted by an approachable, attractive everyman. Sexual script theory would suggest that Paul's presence in the story and Nic's masculine-coded characterization are meant to indicate to the audience that, despite the story ostensibly being about a WLW couple, the more traditionally masculine characters retain the majority of the power throughout the majority of the story (Kim et al. 2007). Kennedy points out, rightfully so, that *The Kids Are All Right* borrows from heteronormative storytelling shorthand that makes it clear that Nic holds a more traditionally masculine role in the family as the breadwinner and decision-maker while Jules is shown as the more traditionally feminine homemaker who defers to Nic's decisions. Kennedy also discusses the fact that the only two people of color in the movie are callously tossed aside by the protagonists when their presence no longer makes life easier for the protagonists.

Howard takes the argument one step further and argues that *The Kids Are All Right* serves as a rite of passage. Rather than focusing more specifically on Nic and Jules or on their children, Howard, much like the film itself, gives an inordinate amount of attention to Paul. Howard argues that the film serves as a tool to amplify the heterosexual male ego by making a man the one who disrupts this self-identified lesbian couple's stability. Howard says, "In the film, we see Paul as the dominant figure in controlling his relationship with [his African American employee] Tanya and as a sex symbol whom Jules cannot resist, even though she identifies as a lesbian. Consequently, a coded message is conferred: Paul has the power to send Jules' and Nic's marriage into a state of crisis and he also has control over his relationship with Tanya" (p. 85). Ultimately, the monogamous, affluent, committed same-sex couple reaffirms their

commitment to one another and to raising their children after insisting that the children's biological father go and find his own family. In these ways, the movie maintains a homonormative outlook.

Recent articles have called attention to the ways in which homonormativity presents certain attributes as "normal" over other attributes. Films like *The Kids Are All Right* and television shows like *Will & Grace* (1998) and *The New Normal* (2013) put forth the idea that this "new normal" is not so different from the "old normal" (Gonzales 2013). Sexual scripts then say that white, economically upwardly mobile, heteronormative, different-sexed coupling is considered the gold standard, and everyone who falls short of that aim is expected to strive to get as close as they can to reaching it, lest they risk being seen as "the other" and rejected by the wider culture as a whole for their difference (Pivek 2018). Hence, those who cannot attain this traditional, heterosexual reality of "normal" strive to say that they are instead the "new normal," that homonormativity is the new version of normal.

Some authors have analyzed the intersections of blackness and queerness and how these sometimes overlapping, sometimes juxtaposed identities have been shown onscreen. Cowan and Rault have used their article to explore the devaluation of art created by queer artists, the devaluation of art created by artists of color, and the devaluation of art created by artists of color within the queer community (2014). They discuss *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), a fictional film written and directed by a black lesbian, about a black lesbian making a film, which is itself a story-within-a-story documentary about a black lesbian actress in the 1930s and 1940s whose forgotten works the protagonist has stumbled across. Cowan and Rault explore debt and debt culture by

examining debt as it relates to race, class, sexuality, colonialism, and so on. In the process of making her film Cheryl, the protagonist in *The Watermelon Woman*, is attempting to recover and preserve photos—which are a piece of culture and history that the rest of Cheryl's society has deemed worthless—of an actress who was so overlooked by filmmakers of her time she was credited in one film, not by her name, but as "The Watermelon Woman." This article is structurally different from Carillo Rowe's interview with Anthony (2017). However, both focus on the creation of art, about queer people of color, by queer people of color. Carillo Rowe and Anthony's article discusses Anthony's career as a writer, director, and movie producer. Specifically the article discusses how Anthony makes works for audiences who are queer people of color, about queer characters of color, specifically because Anthony is a queer Xicana woman who has rarely seen characters onscreen to whom she could relate.

When asked if she is limiting herself by not making her work more accessible for a more "mainstream audience," Anthony openly admits that her work is not centered around white heterosexual protagonists, but she believes the question to be silly in the first place because "all good art is in the details." Anthony says of her work and her target audience, "It is like a bullseye and my ideal audience is right there in the center with me. And they're going to get every joke, every nuance, every meaning. That is my hope. And then outside of that target center, maybe the next concentric circle is comprised of queer feminists of color. But they are getting 90 percent of the material." (p. 358) Anthony goes on to say that there may be people in the audience who are too far removed from the center to understand much or any of the humor, but for the duration of the show that external person witnesses the centering of a group which is rarely centered

in art. Anthony's point is the essence of the intersectional perspective. While stories that are considered to be part of the canon of classics are more likely to have been written by and center on straight, white cisgender men, presuming that this perspective is or should be the "normal" perspective only serves to silence the voices of others (Duong 2012).

While these articles are more about the queering of (white) homonormativity, other articles, like those analyzing *The Kids Are All Right*, work to juxtapose sexuality and race. In particular, Harris and Mushtaq's analysis of gender and sexual minorities in blaxploitation films focuses on the ways in which queer characters are most commonly portrayed as villainous, as comic relief, or as both in these films. MLM are often depicted as effeminate sissies, while WLW more often look like hyper-masculine ogresses. These hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine caricatures serve as a yard stick against which heterosexual audiences can measure themselves (Russo 1985). From a sexual script theory perspective, audiences are learning that they should behave similarly to the ways the masculine heroes and feminine heroines of these stories behave, and, just as important, they should not behave in the ways that these queer-coded evil characters behave. According to Harris and Mushtaq, "[W]hile a queer male sexuality is interpreted by a homophobic lens and scorned, queer femininity is not simply scorned, but rather, created as an object of disgust. Consequently, it reinforces a Black hetero-femininity by demonizing an overly aggressive woman—almost in a cautionary manner." (p. 36) This is ultimately the problem alluded to in the aforementioned articles on white homonormativity but from the opposite angle. In those articles, the problem was that characters of color were being unfairly depicted because the creators did not invest the time into making well-rounded, sympathetic characters of color. Instead, here, the

problem is that the creators did not invest the time into making well-rounded, sympathetic characters of color who happen to be WLW or MLM. This same lack of consideration is often a problem in the depiction of bisexual characters as well.

Bi-Erasure and WLW Stereotypes

Nine of the articles mention WLW stereotypes and bi-erasure. Jenzen discusses several stereotypes and presumptions that plague WLW in general (2013). WLW suffer from a combination of misogyny and homophobia. Jenzen asserts, while discussing psychoanalysis by Freud, "[W]oman is positioned as "Other"… because of her narcissism expressed as an indifference toward men (or her potential to achieve this state of indifference)." (p. 348) She goes on to explain psychoanalysts' belief that homosexuality is immature and narcissistic as a result of being a stage of development, out of which a homosexual individual presumably never matured and never learned to take interest in bodies that are different from their own. Jenzen explains that this identity-as-disease metaphor is what makes the protagonist of *Black Swan* (2010) a tragic, repressed lesbian. Her arrested state of development, emotionally and sexually, and subsequent psychotic break are described as being a result of the protagonist's inability to own her own sensuality or to separate reality from her imagination. Unhinged or downright villainous lesbians have also appeared in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and so on (Harris and Mushtaq 2013; Jenzen 2013). While having so many characters depicted as lesbians also turn out to be evil is problematic, bisexual characters are arguably subject to even more stereotypes than lesbian characters are. Bisexual characters are often not only shown as being evil, but also uncertain and

duplicitous (Pivec 2018). These depictions are possibly a reflection of this culture's history of accusing bisexual people of being indecisive and expecting them to "choose" a non-fluid sexual identity, by identifying only as heterosexual or only as homosexual (Hayfield, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). These narratives further the cultural assumptions and sexual scripts that suggest that bisexual people are more likely to be manipulative than their straight or gay counterparts (Klesse 2011). These narratives also contribute to the intersectional discrimination based on both sex and sexuality that bisexual women in particular are more likely to face than bisexual men, straight women, or gay women (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014; Johnson 2016).

Much like Jenzen, Johnson ties negative depictions of WLW characters to the fact that these stories are being written in a patriarchal society, often by heterosexual, cisgender male creators for presumed heterosexual, cisgender male audiences (2016). Because of this, WLW characters are often designed to tantalize and to serve as a cautionary tale or a validation of heteromasculinity. Johnson points to Catherine, the antagonist in *Basic Instinct*, and Thirteen, a main character on *House*, as examples where the characters' sexuality is used to reflect their negative qualities while at the same time allowing those characters to be titillating. Catherine is manipulative, untrustworthy, and hypersexual. Thirteen is mentally unstable, resulting in reckless one-night-stands with numerous women. However, Johnson argues, Thirteen is saved from herself thanks to a loving and supportive long-term relationship with a man, because the show is produced by straight men for a presumed audience of other straight men. Johnson's points are valid, but she potentially undercuts her argument by providing no counter-examples of content that is produced by WLW women with WLW women in mind.

Taylor takes a more narrow approach to exploring depictions of bisexual women in fiction by focusing specifically on one character, Kalinda Sharma of *The Good Wife* (2009). This character incorporates many of the unpleasant stereotypes associated with bisexual people, by nature of her job. Kalinda works as an investigator for a law firm, "using her sex appeal to get people to open up to her and tell her what she needs to know." (p. 287) She is seen as a manipulative double agent who will sell her services to the highest bidder. Taylor says that other critics praise Kalinda's inclusion as the only nonwhite character on the show and as one of the few prominent bisexual characters in the main cast of any show. However, Taylor argues that the fact that Kalinda has so many negative attributes is even more important specifically because she is the only representation, in multiple minority categories, that audiences see on this show. Taylor says, "In regards to a feminist sexual politics, what I'm interested in is: How does Kalinda "take up space" as a raced, gendered, and sexual subject? What fantasies and fears does she hold for a (presumably) majority white audience, and how does the representation of her bisexuality implicate the colonial legacy of its genealogy?" (p. 288) The problem is not that Kalinda is a complex character who has many attributes that skew towards the negative. The problem is instead that, compared to the representation of white characters and the representation of straight and—to a lesser extent—gay characters, nonwhite, non-monosexual characters have had considerably less exposure in fiction. The more audiences are exposed to distinct characters with comparable superficial traits, the more likely they are to recognize that not all people in a given group necessarily possess a given trait. For this reason, when there are few varied examples of

minority characters, the character depictions that offer less positive messages about those characters are able to take up that much more space in the discourse.

Several authors have also written about the phenomenon of characters whose behavior indicates that they are bisexual but who are not labeled in the text as bisexual. Nearly as much is said about characters who are pejoratively labeled bisexual by other characters. Taylor points to one such example with Kalinda. She says, "Kalinda is also bisexual, although the only time this is mentioned explicitly in the series is through a dismissal, when her colleague [and occasional lover] Cary says, rather grumpily, 'She's bisexual, or whatever.'" (p. 287) In her article Corey mentions the same method of characters talking around a character's bisexuality without actually referring to it as bisexuality (2017). This occurs in *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) with series regular Callie, in *Lost Girl* (2010) with protagonist Bo, and in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) with protagonist Piper. Because Bo is a succubus, who feeds off of the life forces of others via sex in order to survive, the fact that she has lovers who are men and lovers who are women is treated as natural and essential to her survival. However, bisexuality does exist, as a concept separate from heterosexuality, on *Lost Girl*. Corey discusses the one time "bisexuality" is mentioned on the show, when Bo's boyfriend and his long-time friend are animatedly getting reacquainted and Bo's friend Kenzi says their behavior is "vaguely bi-curious."

Corey is right to point out that the treatment of these characters' sexuality is troubling, just like Taylor makes a number of valid points in her exploration of Kalinda's portrayal. However, this research does not include many newer examples of bisexual women on television today and in the recent past. One example is Mulan, a bisexual

Disney heroine. Although Mulan was first introduced in the animated movie of the same name in 1998, she returned to the screen once again in the live-action television show based on Disney characters, *Once Upon a Time* (2011). Key (2015) analyzes Mulan's depiction in the show and the fact that Disney chose the most stereotypically masculine of its female characters as the one who would not be heterosexual. Unfortunately, this critique is outdated. A thorough, updated analysis of queer characters in the show would have to include the episode in which Little Red Riding Hood and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) are revealed to be soulmates as well as the relationship between Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and Robin, daughter of Robin Hood. More recent critiques should also include protagonists like Korra in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012) and Clarke in *The 100* (2014) and supporting characters like Asami in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, Grace in *Black Lightning* (2018) and Rosa in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013).

Gender Dynamics and WLW Communities

Borrowing from West and Zimmerman in "Doing Gender," for the purpose of this study gender expression refers to "a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (1987). In other words, gender refers to the behaviors and attitudes that form the basis of people being perceived as feminine women, androgynous women, masculine women, masculine men, and so on. Twelve of the twenty-nine reviewed articles make some mention of gender expression in the WLW characters or of the characters having a shared sense of community, with other WLW, that they otherwise

may not have experienced. Key (2015) mentions Mulan's masculinity in his critique of WLW depictions on *Once Upon a Time*. Anthony discusses the way she addresses gender and the butchphobia experienced by the main character of one of her independent films (Anthony and Rowe 2017). Most of the articles at least mention gender in passing. Several are critical of the fact that most WLW characters in fiction range from "high femme" to "soft butch," even though the lesbians who became infamous for their political action in the second wave of feminism and who were scapegoated as the rabble-rousers were the more stereotypically masculine butch lesbians (James 2018). Krainitzki asserts that, even when butch lesbians are allowed to exist in the backgrounds of fictional stories, the traditionally feminine protagonist is more likely to end up with a partner who is a soft butch woman or is also traditionally feminine (2016).

Krainitzki also mentions the expression of gender and sexuality in older characters, and how these characters' sexuality is often overlooked or outright eliminated through the death of a partner. Relationships between older women are often desexualized through illness, terminal or otherwise (Krainitzki 2015). She is speaking specifically of older WLW, but Krainitzki could just as easily be talking about the majority of WLW depictions in general in fiction when she says, "The lesbian character tends to be represented outside a lesbian- or LGBT-community and without any friends who are also lesbians, placed within a heteronormative context." (page unavailable) These authors are not wrong in criticizing the majority of WLW works for having largely negative or nonexistent portrayals of more masculine WLW characters. However, that focus means they are neglecting to analyze characters in movies like *Ready Player One* (2018) and *Deadpool* (2016) and in television shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Supergirl*.

All of these films and shows feature one or more WLW characters in supporting roles whose more androgynous or masculine gender expressions could be compared to that of Mulan in *Once Upon a Time* or Anthony's protagonist in her independent film.

A sense of community is mentioned in several of the articles. Proehl analyzes friendships in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) and *The Color Purple* (1985), both the downplaying of explicit romantic relationships in the original texts to subtexts within friendships in the film adaptations and the friendships held by the main characters in general. Proehl argues that, because of her position as a well-to-do white WLW person in the Deep South in the early twentieth century, Idgie in *Fried Green Tomatoes* is more sensitive and insightful when it comes to the plights of others than she may otherwise have been. She is more open to crossing racial lines, forming close friendships, and risking her life for members of a community she could have simply overlooked otherwise (Proehl 2018). Other authors have also emphasized close communities between women, both in the context of stories on television shows and in movies and as a result of women bonding over a shared identity and being fans of those works (Hanmer 2013; Kapurch 2015; Krainitzki 2016; Millward 2014).

Post-Modern Representation

Finally, six of the articles are about works that exist in a sort of post-modern age. Some discuss television shows and movies that are continuing to operate with the mentality that WLW attraction and relationships are new for some people, but the shows and the scholars argue that the characters who have yet to accept and embrace gender and sexual minorities are the ones who are in the wrong (Corey 2017; McNicholas and

Tyler). One article focuses on shows and films whose creators seem to develop their works with the impression that fans are "in the know." Teal and Conover-Williams take creators to task for the notion that works can fall back on heterosexist humor as long as they feature queer characters as well (2016). For example, Teal and Conover-Williams discuss how, with their only prominent African-American or lesbian character, the *Pitch Perfect* (2012) series "both minimizes homophobia (as well as racism), and reproduces stereotypes of queer (and African-American) people as aggressive and predatory… They assume their audience will find these jokes humorous, because homophobia no longer exists, and, therefore, as a culture we can laugh at what people *used* to think about queer people." (p. 20) Homophobia and racism both of course still exist. An intersectional argument would contend that making the sole black WLW character in the film the most sexually aggressive character at the same time does not benefit these historically marginalized groups of people, especially when the audience is less likely to be exposed to more positive representations of black WLW characters elsewhere.

The related but distinct storytelling sibling to this sort of flippant heterosexism is the setting in which non-heterosexuality is merely accepted as a reality, no better or worse than heterosexuality. Mitchell writes about how modern television shows like *Faking It* (2014) subvert the notion that a coming-out story necessarily involves feeling attraction for another girl, discussing that attraction with her, being intimate together, then having the relationship discovered by others (2015). Mitchell contends that *Faking It*, a show about two high school girls who pretend to be a couple to become popular, receives resentment and praise from critics in equal measure.

One area to which these authors come close but never fully cover in their criticisms of these movies and shows is the way in which WLW audiences are so often used as tools to garner ratings but not offered substantial representation. *Faking It* toes that line by having half of the fake couple, Karma, being content in her heterosexuality and newfound popularity, while the other half, Amy, is struck with the sudden realization that she may not be as straight as she once believed herself to be. On the other hand, *The 100* (2014) is one show which has felt the fierce backlash of WLW fans expressing frustration at once again being used as ratings tools, with the idea that the mere inclusion—however brief—of a WLW character will be enough to draw WLW audiences to a show. Waggoner discusses WLW fans taking to the internet with petitions and contacting the writers and producers through social media in the aftermath of the sudden death of fan-favorite WLW character Lexa (2018).

The fans' reactions and the creators' subsequent response have made a few things clear: (1) Fans today are willing and able to organize, in the spirit of earlier waves of feminism before them, for a common goal via the internet; (2) the highly-connected nature of contemporary culture means fans can take their frustrations directly to creators, and they can reasonably expect those creators to engage with them on some level; (3) interactions with fans can alter the course of a show. In the case of *The 100*, fans wrote to producer Jason Rothenberg and explained how and why the trope of violently killing off lesbian characters is overdone. When Rothenberg's response seemed lukewarm and underwhelming, the fans demanded that their voices be heard (Waggoner 2018). Months later, Lexa's character was brought back, in what was essentially a dream sequence, and given a proper farewell.

The aforementioned authors allude to, but do not go into detail about, this recent trend of teasing at queer representation without following it up by having characters irrefutably being queer, a concept known as queerbaiting (Brennan 2018). Queerbaiting is a problem because it allows a historically marginalized group to continue to be marginalized. Queerbaiting is providing just enough of a hint of representation so that the audience members who may already be primed to glean a deeper meaning from subtext will read a situation as romantic, while the audience members who are just noticing the main text may remain blissfully unaware that anything else has possibly occurred. Often queer audiences are more attuned to noticing subtext, such as lingering glances between characters, because this type of storytelling without saying anything outright is a holdover from the Hays Code era (Bridges 2018).

Once Upon a Time has been accused of queerbaiting in regard to the relationship between two of its main characters, Emma Swan and Regina Mills. These two are connected because ten years prior to the start of the series Regina adopts Emma's biological son, who runs away from home to find his biological mother in the first episode. After a contentious start to their coexistence as dual parents in their son Henry's life, the women eventually grow to be best friends. Some fans argue that Emma and Regina have shared several experiences that, if one of them were a man, would cause the audience to assume that they would become a couple. The two characters hit many of the storytelling beats that have come to be expected with sexual script theory. Their relationship has developed from enemies to close confidants. On numerous occasions they have each saved the other's lives and sacrificed their own safety and happiness for the other, including literally going to hell and back for one another.

Mulan being implied to be WLW in the third season of *Once Upon a Time* is likely an attempt by the makers of the show to appease viewers who felt that they had been baited into believing Emma and Regina would end up in a romantic relationship, only to be told that there was no possibility of that type of relationship occurring between them. The same could be said for that show's inclusion in its final season of a WLW couple that is explicitly stated to be a romantic couple. One could argue that this inclusion of a canon WLW couple is, from an intersectional perspective, proof that the creators have an increased understanding of the importance of representation for groups who have traditionally been misrepresented or overlooked entirely.

Queerbaiting in practice would be difficult to identify because, by its nature, it is ambiguous. This is even more true when it comes to relationships between women rather than relationships between men. As shown in the article discussing homosocial relationships between women in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995), platonic relationships between women can include a lot of the intimacy and closeness that one might come to expect from romantic relationships (Millward 2014). This blurring of boundaries and of expectations can lead one person to see implied romantic interest between two characters where another person just sees a close friendship. Further studies could explore the ways that choices in lighting, music, camera angle, etc. affect perceptions of the relationships between characters like Emma and Regina in *Once Upon a Time* or Kara and Lena in *Supergirl* or Jane and Maura in *Rizzoli & Isles*. In contrast, these studies could also look at portrayals of characters who are stated by the creators, outside of the television show or film, to be WLW, though their sexuality is not discussed or shown onscreen. The

depictions of Trini in *Power Rangers* (2017) and Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) could be compared and contrasted at the start of that discussion.

Future Research

This critical literature review has explored scholarly writings published between 2013 and 2018 about fictional WLW portrayals in movies and on television. Those articles have generally fit into the categories of homonormativity and race, bi-erasure and WLW stereotypes, gender dynamics and WLW communities, and post-modern representation. Articles about homonormativity have made it clear that expectations of whiteness have colored perceptions of depictions of queer characters of color. Articles with themes focusing on bi-erasure and WLW stereotypes have demonstrated the ways in which dated views of gender and sexual minorities continue to impact the ways these groups are portrayed. The articles exploring gender dynamics and WLW communities have highlighted the general lack of variation in the types of WLW characters who tend to be shown onscreen. Finally, the articles covering post-modern representation have made it apparent that, while the times have changed and representation is increasing in many areas, many of the damaging storytelling tropes regarding WLW characters remain.

Further research is necessary in this area because, simply put, representation matters. Depictions of minority characters in films and on television affect the ways audiences view those minority groups (Garretson 2015). When characters like Kalinda Sharma are the only regular exposure that audiences have to a non-white bisexual female, then in a way, Kalinda's characterization is literally everything.

Representation matters. Furthermore, thorough analyses and critiques of representation matter. At this point in US history it is becoming increasingly clear that simply checking a box for including WLW and other queer characters is not enough. In the 2016-2017 season there were one hundred thirty-five fictional WLW characters on

broadcast, cable, and streaming television programs (GLAAD 2017). Twenty-five of those characters were dead by the end of that season. If fans' reactions to the death of Lexa is proof, audiences are ready and willing to demand more nuanced representation of queer characters. Simply including WLW characters, a significant portion of which fall into the cliché patterns of the past, is not enough.

There is now a wider array of fictional WLW characters on television and in films in the United States than there has ever been before. Academic research in the past five years on the depictions of these characters has been instrumental in demonstrating the ways in which homonormativity, bi-erasure, and gendered expectations continue to shape characters and to shape audiences' expectations of characters. However, more recent WLW depictions do not always neatly fit into these molds, and recent research has not fully captured these outliers. None of the studies analyzed here, for example, have offered any critical insight on the practice of queerbaiting. Similarly, very few academic articles published in the past five years have discussed portrayals of transwomen in movies and on television, and none of those articles mentioned portrayals of WLW transwomen.

Sexual script theory says that people come to understand their sexual identities through cultural meanings and symbols (Wiederman 2015). Intersectional theory says that every person belongs to multiple categories and that the combinations of those categories impact different people in different ways (McCall 2005). Combining these theoretical perspectives, people learn different lessons about who they are and how the culture overall views people like them based on media examples to which they are exposed. When WLW audiences are offered fictional characters with traits similar to

their own, they are able to relate to those characters and see aspects of themselves in those characters (Martins and Harrison 2012). They can see WLW characters who are heroic, though very stubborn, like Idgie in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and Alex in *Supergirl*. They can see WLW people of color in healthy relationships like Anissa and Grace in *Black Lightning* or struggling with dating like Rosa in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Some audiences can relate to the uncertainty and the dawning recognition of who they are as they come to understand their own identity, like Amy does in *Faking It*. Other audiences can appreciate the confidence of a character whose identification as a bisexual woman is treated as a non-issue, like Clarke in *The 100*. At the end of the day, more nuanced depictions of WLW characters can increase cultural awareness of diversity. Complex, well-rounded WLW characters on television and in movies can allow WLW audiences to imagine that the people in their own lives can see beyond their sexuality and recognize that they are complex, well-rounded individuals as well.

Appendix

Table 1: Final Search Criteria

[Abstract, 2013-2018, Peer Review]	**SocINDEX**	**GenderWatch**	**Totals**
lesbian* AND television	18	19	37
lesbian* AND film*	12	39	51
bisexual* AND television	13	11	24
bisexual* AND film*	8	11	19
queer AND television	14	20	34
queer AND film*	34	64	98
Totals	99	164	263

Figure 1: Article Inclusion/Exclusion

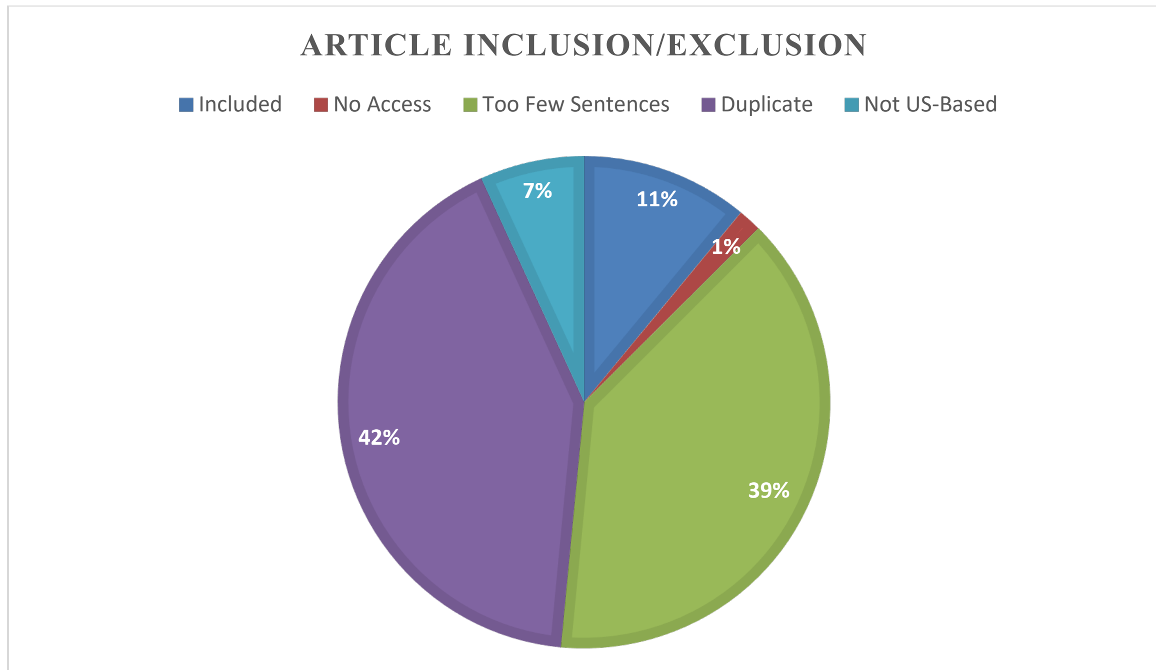

Table 2: Composition of Analyzed Articles

	Author (Publication Year)	**Primary Films/Shows Discussed (Release Year)**	**Article Themes**
1	Anthony & Carillo Rowe (2017)	Various films and stage plays	HR, GDWC, BEWS
2	Corey (2017)	*Grey's Anatomy* (2005), *Lost Girl* (2010), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013)	BEWS

3	Cowan & Rault (2014)	*The Watermelon Woman* (1996)	HR
4	Gonzalez (2013)	Various television shows	HR
5	Gupta (2013)	*The Kids Are All Right* (2010)	BEWS, GDWC
6	Hanmer (2013)	*Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995)	PMR
7	Harris & Mushtaq (2013)	Various films	HR, GDWC
8	Howard (2013)	*The Kids Are All Right* (2010)	HR
9	James (2018)	*Carol* (2015), *The Price of Salt* (1952)	HR, BEWS, GDWC
10	Jenzen (2013)	Various films and photographs	BEWS
11	Johnson (2016)	Various films, television shows, and songs	BEWS
12	Kapurch (2015)	*Brave* (2012), *Tangled* (2010)	GDWC
13	Kennedy (2014)	*The Kids Are All Right* (2010)	HR
14	Key (2015)	*Once Upon a Time* (2011)	GDWC
15	Krainitzki (2015)	Various films	GDWC
16	Krainitzki (2016)	Various films	GDWC
17	McNicholas Smith & Tyler (2017)	Various television shows	HR
18	Messimer (2018)	*Hannibal* (2013)	PMR
19	Millward (2014)	*Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995)	GDWC
20	Mitchell (2015)	Various television shows and novels	PMR
21	Pidduck (2013)	*The Hours* (2012)	GDWC
22	Pivec (2018)	Various films	HR
23	Proehl (2018)	Various films and novels	GDWC
24	Richter (2013)	*Blood and Roses* (1960), *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), *The Hunger* (1983)	BEWS
25	Sandercock (2015)	*Degrassi* (2001), *Glee* (2009)	GDWC
26	Symes (2017)	*Orange Is the New Black* (2013)	PMR
27	Taylor (2016)	*The Good Wife* (2009)	BEWS
28	Teal & Conover-Williams (2016)	Various films, television shows, songs	PMR, BEWS, HR
29	Waggoner (2018)	*The 100* (2014)	PMR

HR: Homonormativity and Race
BEWS: Bi-Erasure and WLW Stereotypes
GDWC: Gender Dynamics and WLW Communities
PMR: Post-Modern Representation
*Films, television shows, and other sources of content are listed as "various" if the article discusses more than three sources of content.

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