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Gay Male Domesticity on the Small Screen: Queer Representations of Gay Homemaking in *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters*

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Abstract

This article acknowledges that contemporary representations of gay domesticity in popular television fiction are often shaped by the discourse of heteronormativity. However, drawing on the potential of popular culture to resist heteronormativity, this article argues that representations of gay domesticity can also be interpreted in terms of queer resistance. To this end, a textual thematic analysis of *Brothers & Sisters* and *Six Feet Under* was conducted to illustrate how these instances of resistance are articulated. This analysis has shown that the series rely on strategies of queer deconstructions to expose how heteronormativity governs and restrains gay domestic arrangements. They also rely on strategies of queer reconstructions to renegotiate gay domesticities in which the boundaries defined by the discourse of heteronormativity are defied, transgressed, and queered.

Key words: domesticity, popular television fiction, gay representation, queer theory, heteronormativity, resistance, *Six Feet Under, Brothers & Sisters*

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> Scotty: "So, we move on. Monogamous, domesticated, married."
>
> Kevin: "Yeah."
>
> Scotty: "I wouldn't have it any other way."[1]

In ABC's *Brothers & Sisters*, gay male characters Kevin Walker and Scotty Wandell decide, after a failed attempt to have a three-way sexual experience, to define their relationship in terms of monogamy, domestication, and marriage. Judging by their reactions, the clarification of what their relationship should be seems very welcome. It expresses a desire for a stable and exclusive partnership, and consolidates that desire into a verbal agreement. It also stresses the analogy with values and certainties shared, cared, and wished for by most members of the Walker family. Like any other middle class couple on the show, Kevin and Scotty utter their aspiration for a domesticity that corresponds to an idealized image of what a relationship, home, and family should be; an image that also can be described as heteronormative.

Queer theorists (e.g., Butler, 2nd ed. 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1999) interpret heteronormativity as the discursive power granted to the compulsory heterosexual matrix in Western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of sex, gender, and sexual identity, and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning universality and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. For that purpose, it relies on discursive practices that validate the heterosexual ideal, consolidate hierarchical gender and sexual identities, and construct compulsory heterosexuality as the unquestioned centre and homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities as its poorer cousins. In this way, it

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[1] Dialogue from *Brothers & Sisters*, season 3, episode 21.

succeeds in depreciating, despising, or excluding those who do not comply or conform to the demands of the heteronormative discourse materialized in specific institutions (e.g., marriage), practices (e.g., reproduction), and a rigid set of norms and values (e.g., monogamy). As such, queer theorists are wary of applauding the inclusion of gay[2] characters in television series that reiterate the binary divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality and consolidate the straight supremacy. This is particularly relevant when gay characters are represented as aspiring to the heterosexual ideal, which brings forth characters who are desexualized, mimic their straight significant others, and appropriate heterosexual norms and values. Such representations evoke Lisa Duggan's notion of "a new homonormativity", by which she refers to a specific set of social and political aspirations of gays who seek inclusion and recognition by heteronormative institutions that promote a neoliberal perspective on society (e.g., institutionalized social inequalities, a reduction of sexual freedom in exchange for privileged civil rights), while pushing back the democratic potential of the state (Duggan, 2002; 2003). Not surprisingly, several studies on contemporary popular television series have illustrated how popular television series proliferate and reify heteronormativity and homonormativity, regardless of whether they feature gay characters (e.g., Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Needham, 2009; Provencher, 2005).

However, equally important in queer theory is the notion that social and cultural sites and institutions can embed resistance to the hegemony of heteronormativity. Drawing on Stuart Hall (2005, p. 71), who postulates that popular culture both embraces and resists hegemonic culture – popular television fiction may embed gay representations that can be interpreted as queer. Within this context, queer refers to anyone who does not consider his or her sexual identity and/or desire in terms of binary and exclusive categories and/or articulates sexual and gender identities that subvert or diverge from what is discursively constructed as

[2] Within the context of this article, the concept of gay will be used as an umbrella-term for gay, lesbian, and bisexual desires and identities.

normal in heteronormative institutions and practices. Hence, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual characters can be represented as queer, for instance by embracing transgressive norms and values instead of the prescribed, traditional set of norms and values. Since the hegemonic discourse that governs popular culture is nonetheless heteronormativity, these queer representations will rather be articulated by strategies of subversion. Drawing on Judith Butler (2nd ed. 1999, pp. 127, 198-201), subversion is understood here as a set of strategies aimed at destabilizing fixed notions of gender and sexuality, and questioning their hegemonic positions from within dominant social and cultural systems. Subversions will not set out to abolish the dominant discourse of heteronormativity and how it shapes identities, practices, norms and values, but rather renegotiate them from within the social and cultural structures. These subversive representations can be articulated by strategies of queer deconstructions which aim to expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function, or by strategies of queer reconstructions which aim to transgress societal assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity and thereby function as viable and queer alternatives to the heteronormative way of living.[3]

Even though this article began by pointing out how the gay male characters of *Brothers & Sisters* articulate heteronormative values and norms, it should be stressed that they also articulate instances of queer resistance. Specifically, in the way both characters negotiate their domesticity, they subvert certain conventional traditions, norms, and values. Similarly, the gay male couple from HBO's *Six Feet Under*, David Fisher and Keith Charles, have been engaged in building a relationship, home, and family that embrace both traditional and transgressive interpretations of homemaking. Therefore, I would like to argue that both series embed queer representations of gay male domesticities. To this end, I will rely on a textual

[3] This study draws a distinction between representational strategies that rely on deconstructive practices and strategies that rely on reconstructive practices. Whereas the first set is mostly occupied with dismantling and questioning heteronormativity, the latter set departs from these deconstructions of heteronormativity to explore viable alternatives.

thematic analysis of a selection of episodes to illustrate how the series renegotiates aspects of domesticity that are enforced by the discourse of heteronormativity.

Before discussing the series' articulations of queer resistance, this article first elaborates on why domesticity can be considered heteronormative, and how it lends itself as a subject for scrutiny by queer theorists.

On Domesticity, Heteronormativity, and Queer Theory

Domesticity can plausibly be considered a pillar of a heteronormative society. Constructed as a body of ideas to cope with 19th century modernist labor divisions, domesticity secured the pre-modern gendered labor division. Non-domestic labor and the public arena were regarded as masculine and reserved for men; domestic labor and the private sphere as feminine and reserved for women (Heynen, 2005, p. 7). Even though the reduction of the feminine link with domesticity can and has been contested, Bart Verschaffel (2002, p. 288) argues that, to this day, domesticity is experienced in relation to pre-modern societies. In contemporary Western society, the home is still understood as a feminine space that provides stability, continuity, security, and nurturing. Likewise, the pivotal position of the nuclear family, certain domestic rituals (e.g., cohabitation, marriage), and traditionalist norms and values (e.g., steadiness, exclusivity, and longevity) bear witness to the way heteronormativity shapes the dominant understanding of domesticity. Judith Halberstam (2005, pp. 2-5) argues that heteronormativity creates preferred temporalities and spatialities. It privileges those who build their lives around reproduction, marriage, and longevity, and who create and move within private and public spaces that coincide with heteronormative time markers. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, p. 562) argue that these temporal and spatial aspects are made preferable through a variety of ways. They point to discursive practices that favor heterosexual romance in cultural products, to heteronormative interpretations of city planning

and domestic architecture, and to the legal and political privileging of heterosexual unions and intimacy.

Despite the increasing visibility of alternative domestic arrangements, the heterosexual ideal remains the preferred and privileged way of living. For instance, the installment of domestic partnerships may be considered legal recognition of same-sex relationships; nonetheless, it fails to erase the supremacy of marriage, most often exclusively reserved for heterosexual pairs. Likewise, a domestic legal measure that revokes the right to adopt children of same-sex couples further consolidates the ideal image of a nuclear heterosexual family. Two lesbians or gay men raising a child will only be legally recognized as mothers or fathers if the institutions recognize them as such.

This discussion also highlights how heteronormativity is manifested in the discursive practices of cultural and institutional politics that govern what is private and public in our society. Warner (1999, pp. 21, 173) elaborated on how institutions define this distinction by the public restraint of sex. In his opinion, our society only allows sex within the boundaries of the home, and restricts or bans all other public sexual activity. He considers it a paradox for a society saturated in mass-mediated representations of sex to be horrified by sexual activities that happen within non-domestic environments. He also underscores that public can be reshaped into the private and vice versa: "So it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that pornography, 'public sex', cruising, sex work, and other elements in a publicly accessible sexual culture are public in some ways, but still intensely private in others" (p. 173). In this regard, Berlant (2000, p. 5) argues that despite the diverse negotiations of private and public expressions of intimacy, normative ideologies continue to regulate which expressions are appropriate and which are not, which ones can be public and which ones cannot.

Berlant's and Warner's reflections support the argument that heteronormativity not only regulates what kind of intimacies are public or private, but also the experience and

expression of intimacies within the private realm of the domestic. In a joint article, Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 553) postulate that intimacy in itself is publicly mediated and negotiated, and thus far from a private matter. Heteronormative discourse governs both the private and public relations of intimacy of both straight and gay men and women. As a consequence, gays have been organizing their domestic arrangements in accordance with the heterosexual ideal. Steven Seidman (2002, p. 6) considers this practice of mirroring the lives of 'conventional heterosexuals' paradoxical, since gays may be allowed to come out in public, but only when they embody a straight model that does not even grant them equal rights. However, according to Warner (1999, pp. 63, 64), some gays seem to think that all the necessary fights have been fought, or appear to be disappointed with the gay and lesbian movement. Instead, they choose to domesticate themselves: "They're home, making dinner for their boyfriends, and that's as united as they're going to get" (p. 63). When gays do engage in politics, they rarely target the processes of heteronormativity. Rather, they seem to strengthen their subordinate position before the discourse of heteronormativity by claiming same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption rights, thereby avoiding questioning or opposing the institutions that regulate what forms of domestic arrangements are appropriate.

This contrasts with a poststructuralist and queer theorist perspective which questions, subverts, or reverses the power relations that govern the debate on gay domesticity. For instance, queer theorists criticize the pursuit of same-sex marriage rights since it would only fortify an institution that discriminates. Warner (1999, pp. 90-94, 121), among others, points out how same-sex marriage is an institution that only grants benefits to a small portion of the gay community (e.g., social justice or insurance health), benefits that are not given to those outside of the couple-form. Further, same-sex marriage is being promoted as a means to disavow a past of sexual freedom and of queer pride. As such, the desire for same-sex marriage reads as a desire for a duplicate of the idealized heterosexual marriage.

This homonormative desire for a heteronormative domesticity does not leave much room for play, subversion, or transgressive queerness. Also, it does not speak of, nor represent, the men and women who choose to live their lives differently, whose politics do not concern the wish for being part of a mainstream heteronormative society. Their views on domesticity are not built around heteronormative time markers nor do they abide by what mainstream society considers private or public space. Halberstam (2005, pp. 2-6) emphasizes how these men and women live in "queer times" and "queer places", where the phase of adolescence can be prolonged, the creation of family life is optional, and communities of subcultural practices function as pivotal spaces for living. Within this notion of a queer time and place, gay domesticity can then be conceptualized as a form of transgressive homemaking. It allows for consideration of the home as detached from the means to pursue stability; for engagement in relationships that are not rigid contracts based on monogamy, reproduction, and longevity; and for the subversion or rejection of gendered labor divisions. Further, it defies being asexual by emphasizing queer sexual desire. However, it does not disavow the domestic in itself. As Kathy Rudy (2000, pp. 207-209) points out, caretaking, emotionality, and privacy play important roles in the daily lives of many gays. To create a gay domesticity that is queer, one needs to avoid or renegotiate the pursuit of a prescribed, preferred homonormative way of homemaking.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Televised Gay Domesticity

Even though the academic debate on gay domesticity culminated in the 1990s, popular television fiction only started fully representing gay households from the 2000s on. Since then, several pay-cable television series (e.g., *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, *Six Feet Under*) and network television series (e.g., *Brothers & Sisters*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Modern Family*) have dramatized and scrutinized the domestic arrangements of recurring or main queer characters. In the first decade of the 21st century, most same-sex couples in popular

television fiction stayed within the boundaries shaped by heteronormativity. The most common form of domesticity is the creation of a monogamous relationship between two middle class men or women who are settling down in the surroundings of a comfortable home where they start cherishing the wish to, one day, have children. Since these series are part of popular culture, these homonormative representations are to be expected within a medium that proliferates and reiterates hegemonic discourses. These representations evoke Sender's work on the gay market. She argues that predominantly gay men are being targeted by images of gayness that are rid of sexuality and replaced by an assumed "class-specific, gay subcultural capital, marked by aesthetic tastefulness and sexual discretion" (2003, p. 360). Ron Becker (2006, p. 175) and Larry Gross (2001, p. 117) underscore that most of television's gay-themed content from the 1990s on is used to counter the safe and obedient image of major television networks. The networks include gay characters to lure audiences, but represent the characters in a way that they do not challenge morality. Becker (2006, pp. 171-175) and Streitmatter (2009, p. 188) do stress that major network television and pay-cable television differ in their approach to gay representation. A series produced on a major network is restrained by commercial considerations and legislative regulations, and is less able to portray nudity or same-sex intimacy. Pay-cable television fiction, on the other hand, is able to push ethical and moral boundaries and escape certain economic restraints. Notwithstanding these different contexts of production and broadcasting, the fiction being aired on both types of channels engages quite similarly with heteronormativity. As Samuel A. Chambers (2009) illustrates, subversive representations of queerness can be found in fiction on pay-cable and major network television. Within these series, representations of *queer* domesticities both resemble and subvert the ideal of a heteronormative domesticity. Particularly, the queerness of these domesticities is articulated through the subversive strategies of queer deconstruction and queer reconstruction. These representations rely on deconstructive practices that mock,

parody, or expose the incongruities that typify the picture-perfect home and family life, and on reconstructive practices that portray alternative ways of living together, rearticulate certain traditions and norms, or renegotiate gendered domestic labor.

To illustrate how the representation of gay domesticities in popular television series articulate, to a certain extent, queer resistance, a textual thematic analysis of HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and ABC's *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-2011) was conducted.[4] The two series differ in tone and style, but share significant narrative and genre elements. Both drama series focus on grown-up middle class family members who lose the pater familias in the first episode. The death of the father compels some of the children to take on responsibility in the family business, and reconfigures a former patriarchy into a matriarchy. These series were chosen because they both feature prominent gay households – Kevin Walker and Scotty Wandell in *Brothers & Sisters*, and David Fisher and Keith Charles in *Six Feet Under*. Both series are exemplary for a 21st century television series that represents elaborately gay male domesticity. For this study, a selection of episodes was made based on the viewing of all episodes of the complete series of *Six Feet Under* on DVD, and of the first three seasons of *Brothers & Sisters* on DVD.[5] Out of each series, ten episodes were selected that portray gay homemaking. In the selected episodes, scenes were chosen that represent or reflect how the gay characters negotiate domesticity. The thematic analysis of the scenes was conducted systematically to enable a thorough comparison of the representations of gay domesticity in both series. To this end, a tangible conceptualization of the concept of 'domestic' was needed. For the interests of this article, I focused on two general aspects repeatedly associated with the realm of domestic, namely the notion of home and the notion of family. Subsequently, I

[4] This article takes into account that *Six Feet Under* is broadcast on a pay-cable channel and *Brothers & Sisters* on a commercial network channel. This means that the former is able to, for instance, represent sexuality more explicitly. However, it does not imply that heteronormativity will be more likely challenged by the former. Drawing on Chambers (2009), both series are able to equally subvert heteronormativity, even though they may have to rely on different representational strategies.

[5] At the time of this analysis, the fourth season of *Brothers & Sisters* was not yet finished, and is thus excluded from this study.

studied the representations of how the gay male couples make a home and a family for themselves. This form of interpretative analysis fits into the tradition of queer reading, a practice elaborated by Alexander Doty (2000, p. 2). He describes a queer reading as an inquiry into why a text can be understood as queer. Like Doty, I recognize my reading position as individual and prefigured. However, my intention is not to formulate comprehensive strategies of queer resistance, rather to elaborate on the queer potential of popular texts to resist heteronormativity.

Queer Home

Probably the most obvious aspect of domesticity is the notion of home as a temporal and material location.[6] The temporality of a home is characterized by the creation and continuity of a home. In both series, this temporality is first represented by the valorizing of the repetition of daily activities. Home is represented as a place for waking up, having breakfast, and coming home to in the evening. The repetition of daily activities is not viewed as tedious by either of the series' main gay characters, rather is favored and embraced. Daily routines are also barely changed, and when change does occur, not all the characters succeed in coping with it. In *Six Feet Under*, David experiences change as stressful, for instance when he comes home and finds Keith in front of the television eating pizza instead of waiting to have dinner together (season 4, episode 9). For David, daily routines are not only self-evident, they are part of a normative stability. They are crucial to the notion of domestic steadiness that brings the nuclear family together around the dinner table. David expects this type of stability, which not only becomes articulated through his disappointment in divergences from daily routines, but also in his desire for a temporal and traditional progression of homemaking – cohabiting, having children, and being married until the day they die. Since the series

[6] This article acknowledges that the notion of home also has a spatial dimension, which refers to the physical location of the material home (e.g., its implantation in a neighborhood, its nearness to friends or relatives). However, because of the absence of significant scenes that represent the spatiality of the home, this article limits the discussion to the temporal and material dimensions of home.

depicts scenes that represent David and Keith living together, adopting two young brothers, getting married in front of a priest, and being together until the day Keith dies, the heteronormative temporal progression can hardly be ignored.

Brothers & Sisters also depicts the domestic temporality of the gay couple in harmony with heteronormativity. For Kevin and Scotty, marriage is a temporal marker that shows their dedication to the creation and continuity of domesticity. Kevin for instance, who hesitates at first, eventually admits to himself and Scotty that he also wants to make a long-lasting commitment. He wishes to become a family "because that never ends."[7] Scotty for his part clarifies to Kevin that he considers marriage a moment to show everyone "this is the man I choose to be with."[8] In explaining his desire to marry, Scotty not only accentuates his dedication to Kevin but also the public dimension of marriage. Thereby, the idea that a relationship needs to be publicly valorized through marriage to enhance its value is also reified. This evokes a homonormative position that does not question the fact that private intimacy needs to be publicly governed. In general, the gay couples in *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters* utter chiefly homonormative plans and aspirations for their future. However, these heteronormative facets are adjoined in their representations with instances of criticism. Heteronormativity may have affected the gay characters, but it cannot prevent them from feeling confused, troubled, or infuriated by it. For instance, even though Scotty and Kevin want to get married based on homonormative aspirations, they are frustrated with the impossibility of getting a marriage recognized by the state of California. In the episode that precedes the marriage proposal, they are discussing the idea of forming a domestic partnership:

> Scotty: "Kevin, for us, domestic partnership is it. You know, our only legal option, our version of marriage. For now at least." (season 2, episode 14)

[7] Quote from *Brothers & Sisters*, season 2, episode 15.
[8] Quote from *Brothers & Sisters*, season 2, episode 14.

By pointing out the legal reality for gays in California, Scotty exposes how, to this day, the preservation of marriage between a man and a woman is one of the most visible ways of how mainstream contemporary society holds on to a fixed vision of gender and sexual identity. The same-sex marriage issue is significant since it demonstrates how heteronormativity, on the one hand, convinces gay men and women to claim the right to marry. On the other hand, it demonstrates how heteronormativity also empowers governmental institutions to retain a discriminatory hierarchy between homosexuality and heterosexuality. As such, the scene exposes the paradoxical politics of heteronormativity.

The same episode also criticizes, through Kevin, the normative expectations associated with marriage. Even though he stresses that he might sound "like a thirty year-old straight man,"[9] Kevin says that he cannot assure his partner that he will ever be ready to acknowledge someone as the person he wants to be with for the rest of his life. Aside from reiterating the stereotype of the heterosexual man who cannot commit to one woman, the quote can also be read as a mild questioning of marriage as a contract establishing a mutual future as rigidly exclusive and monogamous.

In addition, both series not only deconstruct the idealization and normalization of heteronormative norms, values, and traditions, but also reconstruct norms, values, and traditions to the benefit of a queer understanding of home. In *Six Feet Under*, for instance, a guest named Sarge convinces David and Keith to have a three-way with him. As a consequence, the repetition and safeguarding of exclusive sex is interrupted. The alteration to the exclusiveness of David and Keith's domesticity is further explored in the morning-after scene. A panning shot first frames Keith in his dressing gown having breakfast, reading the newspaper, and drinking coffee. The camera then shifts to a half-naked Sarge, who is baking eggs. The next shot shows David walking in, surprised to see Sarge still around. Only through

[9] Quote from *Brothers & Sisters*, season 2, episode 14.

the gazes that Keith and David exchange is David's discomfort expressed, as well as Keith's ease with the changed morning situation (season 3, episode 8). David's reaction can be read as a hetero- and homonormative response to the transgressive sex act – feeling shame and resentment for having participated in queer sex. Furthermore, it evokes associations with how David is represented throughout the series. Not only does he fit the stereotype of the white, middle class, homonormative, gay man – a dominant way in representing gay men on television (e.g., Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Provencher, 2005; Shugart, 2003) – he also repeatedly feels the need to reaffirm the norms and values associated with that identity. Thereby, the series not only upholds a limited perspective on gay diversity, but also promotes and privileges middle class lifestyles, materialized and commodified in the safe environment of a suburban domesticity (Duggan 2002; 2003; Hennessy, 1995; Silverstone, 1997). However, the scene can also be interpreted otherwise. David's reaction could signify questioning of his own normative behavior, since he willfully consented to having a three-way. Especially, when taking into account that many episodes depict David engaged in non-normative sexual acts (e.g., having sex outdoors, having sex with strangers, having an open relation in which sex with others is allowed) (cf. infra). As such, the scene – and the series in general – subtly deconstructs the supremacy and desirability of middle class domesticity by exposing how heteronormative principles govern daily life. In letting David question his idea of a relationship, the series puts the necessity for stability, fixity, and exclusivity up for debate. This is even more stressed by Keith. He seems to be fully at ease with the disruptions and does not mind that Sarge has become a temporary member of their domesticity. In this way, this scene foregrounds the potential, changeability, and pleasure of a gay domesticity that goes beyond the traditional conventions. In addition, the scene also illustrates how the series negotiates the racial dimension of the gay couple. In contrast to the white gay couple of *Brothers & Sisters*, the relationship of Keith and David is interracial. At the beginning of the

series, David is depicted as sexually conservative, while Keith is depicted as sexually more progressive. Since Keith is a black man, this evokes the racialized stereotype of a black man as hypersexual and morally inferior to white puritan sexual values (Hall, 1997). However, during the series, David is represented as a character who gradually accepts his norms and values as sexually narrow, and who changes his perspective on sex so it matches how Keith thinks about sex.

Regarding the way the gay couples negotiate their home as a material location, heteronormativity again seems to be dominating the representations. In both series, the material home is cherished and presented as the safest haven. Rare are the scenes that feature the gay couples in other environments that are not work or family related. At home, the gay characters express their love to one another and have sex with one another. It almost reads as if being gay can only be articulated within the environment of the material home – an image that is even more problematic when considering that having the safe surroundings of a material home is again a middle class privilege (Hennessy, 1995). Once outside the material home, the gay characters seem to refrain from stressing their sexuality. As such, they condone the suppression of their same-sex desires in public to uphold an asexual image. In *Brothers & Sisters*, several episodes show how Kevin and Scotty obey the public discourse of heteronormativity. The episode featuring Scotty's parents visiting their son contains a scene of Scotty asking Kevin not to engage in public displays of affection in front of them (season 3, episode 5). In another episode, Kevin is forced by his boss not to bring Scotty to a client dinner because the display of same-sex intimacy might shock the client (season 3, episode 3). As such, an image of home as the only place where gayness can be openly articulated is maintained.

Six Feet Under goes further by exploring how heteronormativity can intrude into the privacy of the home to restrain private expressions of gayness. This occurs in the episode

featuring a social worker visiting Keith and David at home to check whether they can be considered suitable parents.[10] While waiting for the social worker to arrive, Keith is busy removing photographs, books, or videos that might be considered 'gay'. A dispute rises, as David does not see the point of erasing the gayness when it is obvious that David and Keith are both gay men. Keith acknowledges this, but argues that he does not want their home to look "too gay", with objects which could be interpreted as things that could turn his niece into a lesbian. In fact, by suggesting that some people think this way, Keith presumes the social worker to be a straight public figure who may assume a normative hierarchical position and who may believe that being repeatedly exposed to things that signify gayness could affect one's sexuality in a linear fashion. David, who mocks such a potential consideration, agrees to removing a picture frame that contains a black and white photograph of a male nude's back on the basis of it being a "pretty gay" picture (season 2, episode 12). As such, the eventual removal of art on the basis of representing the object of gay sexual desire illustrates the power of a publicly controlled heteronormative discourse which tries to intrude on private gay lives to regulate the domestic environment. However, the intrusive power of the discourse of heteronormativity becomes unstable from the moment the social worker is implied to be gay. He is clearly fond of Keith's coffee table and proclaims, in a flamboyant manner, his love for the store where Keith bought the table. By replacing the feared figure of heteronormativity with a gentle gay man, the series mocks David's and Keith's assumption that heteronormativity is everywhere. Yet, what this scene does not question is how in contemporary Western society political, social, and cultural institutions have the power to govern and invade the homes of those who do not live up to the standards of a middle class, heteronormative society.

[10] In the second season, Keith and David are taking care of Keith's niece, Taylor, and are hoping to become legal guardians of the child.

Last, *Brothers & Sisters* tries to defy the notion that gayness needs to be 'sanitized' in public. Even though Kevin and Scotty are represented as having issues with being intimate in public, the series depicts a passionate kiss between Scotty and Kevin on a parking lot in broad daylight. The kiss is shown from three different angles, including one shot that shows an unconcerned man passing (season 3, episode 8). It may be a mere kiss, but the indifference of the passer-by and the visual emphasis on the kiss both aid to represent same-sex intimacy that ignores or defies the heteronormative codes of conduct that dictate appropriate gay behavior in public.

Queer Family

While the former section discussed the representation of a queer home in both series, this section aims to draw attention to the idea of 'family' creating and inhabiting the gay domestic home. Particularly, this part looks at how the notion of family is conceptualized in the series and to what extent the negotiations of domestic labor and roles, as well as of intimacy and sexuality within these families, diverge from the heteronormal.

The friction that comes from both abiding by and resisting heteronormative practices is already present in the way both gay male couples define themselves as a family. On the one hand, the couples aspire to become picture perfect nuclear families. For instance, in *Brothers & Sisters*, this is underscored by how they characterize their relationship as monogamous and domestic to ensure a stable basis for their family. In addition, both couples express and pursue their wish to have children. On the other hand, they are represented as struggling with the restrictions that come with a rigid and traditional interpretation of family. In *Six Feet Under*, this inward conflict is most visible in the way David and Keith try to become foster parents of two young brothers, Durrell and Anthony. In advance, story elements play out the non-normative aspects of their family. David and Keith have not yet validated their relationship through marriage or domestic partnership, nor are they blood-related to the boys.

Furthermore, conflicts between Durrell and Keith hamper the creation of a tight and happy family, since Keith remains skeptical of being the right parent for these boys. Nonetheless, at the end of the final episode of the series, the four members of the family are portrayed together in a symbolic dinner scene. David is saying grace and thanking God for bringing the boys into their lives and making them a family (season 5, episode 12). This scene highlights the stark contrast to previous scenes which emphasized the family's conflict and chaos. However, it does not erase the former conflict, nor does it claim that family can only exist in balance. Instead, through David's speech, the scene makes clear that they became a family the moment they met the boys, and thereby acknowledges that chaos and conflict are part of negotiating family relations. It may be argued that the series represents a family tied to heteronormative values such as stability and the desire to have children, but it does so by representing it as being just as chaotic and instable. Further, the series defies the gendered stereotype of gay men being unwilling to start a family, in contrast to the ubiquitous representations of lesbians cocooning and having children (e.g., *Queer as Folk, The L Word*).

Gendered stereotypes are also resisted in the way the series represents the allocation of domestic labor and roles within the gay families. From a heteronormative point of view, a gay couple with a more 'feminine' and a more 'masculine' partner will be assumed to have divided its tasks and roles according to gendered behavior. In both series, the characters of Scotty and David can be considered more 'feminine', while Kevin and Keith can be regarded as more 'masculine'. However, neither of the couples falls back on clear gendered divisions of labor. David and Keith both perform 'feminine' tasks, such as making lunch and buying groceries, while Scotty and Kevin both clean and cook. Further, when a gendered pattern emerges in both relationships, it is resisted. For instance, when Kevin proclaims the masculine role of financial caretaker, Scotty renegotiates Kevin's role by asking for financial equality in their domesticity (season 3, episode 8). Even more, both families seem to parody normative

gendered roles. To this end, language or mimicking gendered behavior is used. David calls himself a jealous housewife when he finds out Keith is working at a gay bar (season 4, episode 7); David calls Keith "a bitch" for making him run to the kitchen for coffee (season 2, episode 9); and Scotty carries Kevin across the threshold when returning home from their wedding (season 2, episode 16). Through these subtle subversions, the two series reveal how heteronormativity governs the domestic by installing and reiterating fixed gender roles. In deconstructing these roles, the series avoid representing the creation of a gay family as a blind appropriation of heteronormative family roles and values. Rather, they reconstruct the gay families into changeable and modifiable entities and, to a certain extent, represent them as aware of mechanisms that secure domestic unevenness and pre-defined roles.

This article has already elaborated on the relationship between same-sex intimacy and the material home. In the final part of this section, the negotiation of same-sex intimacy will be explored further, but with a focus on the negotiation of sex within the entity of the family itself. Since sex and sexuality are decisive characteristics of the discourse of heteronormativity, the representation of sex is pivotal to the reiteration or reversal of normative sex practices. Warner (1999, pp. 25, 26), drawing on Gayle S. Rubin, explicates how, in Western society, monogamy, heterosexuality, sex in pairs, and procreative sex are considered illustrations of 'good sex', while all other sexual desires and experiences are 'bad sex'. Given that same-sex sexual practices are considered far from good sex practices, gay sex is mostly never represented in mainstream popular culture products. Therefore, even though I have already argued that restricting the representation of gay sex to the home environment is safeguarding the image of an asexual domesticated gay, the representing of gay sex in itself can be considered resistant. In neither series is same-sex sexual desire and gay sex omitted.[11] Even more, both series expose how heteronormativity intervenes as a public regulator in the

[11] Since *Brothers & Sisters* is broadcast on network television, depictions of sex in general are often limited to scenes of foreplay, cutting out during an ongoing passionate kiss, or scenes of after-sex intimacy. *Six Feet Under* is broadcast on pay-cable television, and is thus able to include actual queer sex acts.

private experience of sex. In *Brothers & Sisters*, this is illustrated in the episode where Kevin and Scotty are going on a mutual date with Kevin's ex Chad. Although they declined his proposal for a three-way, the horny newlyweds are open to the idea, even assuming that the midnight knock on their apartment door is Chad's. They both agree to have a three-way, an idea quickly dispensed with when it is Kevin's sister Sarah at the door instead. When Sarah discovers what was going on, both men feel ashamed and start reproaching each other for wanting the three-way (season 3, episode 21). Despite their mutual desire to have the threesome, their reaction to being caught considering it reflects the power heteronormativity has over both men. However, the power of heteronormativity is exposed as being unattached to the straight character in the room. Even though Sarah instigated both men's shame, she is not a figure of heteronormativity. Since she recently seduced a colleague into having sex in the office and shows support for the men's idea of a three-way, Sarah is articulating more resistance to heteronormativity than both her brother and his partner.

In *Six Feet Under*, the gay characters are less faithful to the notions of exclusivity, monogamy, or sex in pairs. Nonetheless, the series also explores the conflict between the reiteration of good sex and bad sex acts, and the desire to transgress the boundaries of normative sex. Throughout several episodes, David expresses his doubt about having an open relationship. At the same time, he keeps on having sex with other men. David desires to transgress his boundaries, but is represented as being highly sensitive to heteronormativity. As such, his ideal negotiation of gay sex as an exclusive practice between him and his male partner is continuously defied by himself and his partner. He resists it himself, for instance, when he brags to Keith about having sex with Sarge, even after they agreed to be monogamous (season 4, episode 9). In addition, by stressing that he "fucked" the masculine Sarge, he implies a reversal of stereotypical sex roles, where the more masculine partner becomes a 'bottom' and the more feminine partner becomes a 'top'. Stressing that he

penetrated Sarge, he exposes his own sexual transgression. However, his partner Keith defies it too by not only having sex with other men, but also with a woman. Consequently, David is confronted with sexual desires that not only transgress the sexual role but also the gender of the desired body. On the one hand, the series uses David to expose how heteronormativity governs the private experience of gay sex by safeguarding a binary divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as between normative and non-normative sex. On the other hand, it uses David and Keith to present their sexual transgressions as illustrations of how sex can be renegotiated across the heteronormative binary divides.

Conclusion

Today, the creation of gay domesticity is still being shaped, governed, and evaluated by the discourse of heteronormativity. Building a home and becoming a family remain practices socially and culturally tied to heteronormative, middle class values and norms that consolidate stability, exclusivity, and longevity. Since the discourse of heteronormativity is hegemonic in our contemporary Western society, it succeeds in consolidating a binary divide between heterosexuals and gays, on the one hand, and favoring the heteronormative model of the nuclear family on the other. Because of this, representations of gay domesticities within popular culture are often portrayed with the same heteronormative norms and values. However, since hegemonic discourses can be defied through articulations of resistance, this article has illustrated how representations of gay domesticity can also harbor queer resistance.

The textual thematic analysis of *Brothers & Sisters* and *Six Feet Under* has shown how both series articulate gay domesticities according to heteronormative principles of time and place. The gay couples value stability, progression of domestic order, and longevity. In addition, they marry and pursue their desire to raise children. Finally, they look upon their material home as one of the only safe havens where queerness can be experienced. However, the series also engage in articulating queer resistance, through textual instances that both

question the heteronormative dominance in formulating a domestic order and that renegotiate a domesticity by reversing the prescribed patterns or transgressing rigid boundaries. First, strategies of deconstruction are present in scenes and storylines that aim to expose the mechanisms that govern the public and private experience of the domestic. For instance, through representing the gay characters in conflict with the unequal and rigid demands of the heteronormative ideal, these series represent heteronormativity as hierarchical and oppressive, but also incongruent. Second, strategies of reconstruction in the series help to create a queer understanding of homemaking. By allowing the characters to mock, reverse, or rearticulate gendered domestic labor and roles, they disrupt their own normative behavior, transgress their shame of exploring their non-normative desires, and express and acknowledge their gayness outside the boundaries of the private home.

Even though these popular series reiterate heteronormativity, this article has set out to underscore the potential of popular television series to go against the grain. *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters* reflect an everyday reality in which gay homemaking is still under public scrutiny. They show the growing demands of gay men for the legitimization of their homes and families. They evoke the critique of queer theorists that homonormative aspirations regarding domesticity support the oppressive mechanisms of heteronormativity. Above all, they reveal how gay homemaking is a complex negotiation of adoption and transgression of traditional needs, norms, and values, centred on a desire for domesticity instead of a desire for the heteronormal.

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