

MARY M. DALTON: Let me start, Denis, by asking you what is it that you teach?

DENIS PROVENCHER: So I always answer that question in relationship to my audience. So I have an interdisciplinary doctorate in French Cultural Studies, but my secondary area, which has become my primary area, is Gender and Women's Studies, in particular, representations of LGBTQ communities in France. And obviously, having grown up in the States, I always kind of compare that in an intercultural lens to American representations or US representations of LGBT identities. So whenever I teach France or teach French-speaking cultures, I always do it through the lens of my students, and the majority of them, being at an American university, they're born and raised in the United States.

MARY M. DALTON: So most of them have seen *Will and Grace*?

DENIS PROVENCHER: Well, you know, now in the year of 2015... (laughs) and you realize this as much as I do, that I am surprised by the references, the cultural references, that make sense to our students. With *Will and Grace* running between 1998 and 2005 or 2006, and many of our first-year students at university now are born in the late '80s, I think it's the late '80s or early '90s, and so a lot of them were little kids when you and I were watching *Will and Grace* on television. So they may have seen it in syndication.

And it represents, for you and me, I think it represents kind of a flashpoint in terms of LGBT history and visibility for LGBT on television, but for them, for better or worse, LGBT has always been part of the cultural landscape, and they tend to question it less, which in a lot of ways is indicative of the way representation has helped to chart a path of equality in the US, but at the same time, it's become normative, and so they don't necessarily question its existence, they just expect it, and that's kind of where we were going politically in terms of representation, but it also causes a new set of questions to arise.

MARY M. DALTON: So when we think about *Will and Grace* and we think about this idea of heteronormativity, it was a safe strategy, right, for the time period when the show was on the air?

DENIS PROVENCHER: Absolutely.

MARY M. DALTON: So if you wanna explain a little bit, what is heteronormativity, and what about now, is it something that you still see popping up?

DENIS PROVENCHER: Yeah. So we understand heteronormativity and homonormativity as forms of cultural behaviors that are seen as mainstream. If we think about heteronormativity, what we're talking about is how, when we turn on the television or we look at YouTube or we look at streaming video, those representations of characters reflect the normative, normal-gendered models that we grew up with. Most of us grew up with a mom and dad, that's not always the case anymore, I grew up with a mom and dad. I have a few students who have grown up with two moms or two dads. I actually have a student who's grown up with four moms, two moms who were together who separated, and now have two new partners, and when she

came to university graduation, all four moms were there, and in some ways, that's the new normal.

But generally, heteronormativity has to do with a binary based on gender differences that gets reproduced socially. And what that means is, there is this story that unfolds of mom and dad and children, and the children will eventually grow and get married and have their own children, and so there's this narrative of progress that reproduces the middle-class, heterosexual family.

Now normativity in terms of homonormativity does the same thing, except that instead of a mom and a dad, you have two moms or two dads, but they also, like their neighbors in a community, will also reproduce those same stories. So a good example, I think, for some of our current students is *Modern Family*, in terms of, if you look at the way the family has become blended, in some ways, the gay characters of Cam and Mitchell have become integrated into a larger social fabric. So they're two gay men who, one's a lawyer and one's a stay-at-home dad, they adopted a child from an Asian country and they reproduce, in a certain fashion, the same story of marriage with children, raising children, within a larger community of individuals who subscribe to those same values. And those values tend to be middle-class values in terms of how we conceptualize love in the form of a couple, how we conceptualize progress in the form of raising kids, educating those children, having them get good jobs, good-paying jobs, and then kind of continuing along that same line.

MARY M. DALTON: Now if we're in a post-binary world, or we hope we're moving to a post-binary world, how does that play out, what does that mean, and is television gonna go there with us? I think maybe with *Transparent* it does, I mean, I think we're starting to see some evidence of that.

DENIS PROVENCHER: Yeah, I think so too. You know, I think, and I don't know if, when you asked me about the interview, I don't know if you have ever seen this book or if you've taught—

MARY M. DALTON: I have not.

DENIS PROVENCHER: *Gay Television and Straight America*, by Ron Becker. He's in Communication Studies at Miami University of Ohio. And I cite that only because I think we have moved—his argument is that gay television was really at its height in the 1990s, and that in the post-2000 and the post-binary world, as you're talking about, which is not what he talks about, but he says that gay television was for straight America, and that it kind of reproduced this normative model to kind of integrate us into the social fabric. And I think that's true, and in the post-binary, in the post-gender-binary era of 2000 and beyond, I think what I see as a spectator and maybe our students do as well, is that the characters—and we need to make the distinction between gay characters, which I see as homonormative, and queer characters, which I see as kind of post-binary—the gay characters like Mitch and Cam are doing just what I said, in terms of homonormative strategies.

In terms of the post-binary era, I think we have to kind of look further afield to find queerness. And the *Transamerica* [sic] example that you use, I think, is a good example of how we've

moved on to new horizons. And when I use the term queer, I think about it not only in terms of a noun, in terms of who are queers, but queer in terms of a verb or a process, in terms of “How do we question those norms?” And I think we see a range of questionings of norms that move us beyond a post—a binary, a gender binary, so in terms of “post,” we can think of “post-gender-binary.” But I think we have moved into representing a whole range of identities now that are no longer stable.

And as somebody who is a queer television watcher, what I mean by that is taking a show like *Homeland* and seeing that characters who are seen as... So we have a male protagonist who is a returned army veteran and we don't know if he is a hero or whether he has converted to Islam, and he couples with, or he gets involved with a CIA agent who is quite familiar with the Middle East, but who also suffers from mental illness in terms of her bipolar illness. And I think what we see happening is relationships that are forming between characters who straddle identities that are similar to the LGBT identities we saw in the '90s, meaning, they're asking us to queer or to question what it means to be American, what it means to be a hero versus a traitor, and what it means to be a sane CIA agent, a rational CIA agent, or somebody who is irrational and perhaps on the verge of her own mental breakdown.

And so in a post-gender era, I think we're seeing queerness emerge on television in ways that perhaps we could not have predicted, but that get at issues of intersection and intersectionality between communities, in ways that allow us to break down constructs and differences to think about equal rights for a larger portion of the population, if that makes sense.

MARY M. DALTON: It makes perfect sense, and I think that's an elegant and very provocative example, useful, very useful. So when we look back at a show like *Will and Grace*, with maybe some nostalgia for the simplicity of what we're looking at, I'm taken by your commentary about how that was really a show for straight America, which I think is true, and I think you make that point in the chapter quite well. And it's funny, though, how topical it becomes politically when you have Joe Biden using this as a sort of movement to prod Barack Obama on moving toward marriage equality, which at the time seemed like...it seemed like a moment, and all of that stuff is just happening so quickly, to think about the enduring cultural cache, in some ways, anyway, of *Will and Grace*, do you think about that?

DENIS PROVENCHER: I do, and I think as much as we can critique *Will and Grace*, and as much as we can say that it was a point in time and maybe it captured that point in time, it's still, I think, politically relevant in many ways. Those images on television, sometimes they reflect the reality, but sometimes they also kind of push, they push forward not necessarily an agenda, but they kind of lean in a direction that a larger audience wants television to go into, when a country is not yet politically ready for that to happen. And so in some ways, it may reflect a tendency, but I also think it charts a will of a certain group of people as well, and so that—for me, representation is always political and that's one of the things that Richard Dyer says.

Very early on, Richard Dyer was, and is still, one of the top scholars in terms of star studies, but also in terms of one of the first important works on representations of gays and lesbians in

cinema and in television, and one of the things that Richard Dyer says is that representation is always political. And that's one of the things I try to stress with my students as well, is that even though we may be talking about a piece of fiction, that there's a grain of truth in that fiction, in terms of, if a television show like *Will and Grace* has an audience, to me what that means is the audience has a will to see change in society.

And for me, *Will and Grace* is still, as much as I like to critique it, it's still my favorite television show. When I feel like I need some retreat from all of the events in today's world, it brings comfort to see a space and to be able to reenter and reconnect with those characters in a way that reminds me that "Okay, there's a space of acceptance and a space of understanding that I don't need to explain to anyone." And although *Will and Grace*—and I make this argument too, in the chapter—is that although *Will and Grace* is for straight audiences, there are elements of queerness in the show through the secondary characters of Jack and Karen, that those are the characters, for me, that I continue to go back to, in terms of "Now when did she say this, and how can I use that in my everyday speech, in a way to kind of shock people?" And for me, those are the take-away moments in the show that I'm actually still drawn to quite strongly.

MARY M. DALTON: So explain for students how you see Jack and Karen as queer characters, give them some sense of what that means, the way that you're defining it.

DENIS PROVENCHER: Yeah, and I think in some ways, the queerness goes back to what I was saying about the two main characters on *Homeland*, Carrie and Brody. So Carrie and Brody are kind of characters of failure, and what I mean by that is being on the outside of normativity. So Carrie is bipolar and she has these moments of fallacy or of irrational thought. Brody has these moments of being, his thought process being, quote-unquote, "polluted" by radical Islam, and those moments, I think, represent for me a level of authenticity in terms of how each of us as human beings have these moments where we don't fit into society's model.

And when I go back to *Will and Grace* and I watch Jack and Karen, these two, unlike Will and Grace—Will who's a successful lawyer, and Grace who's a successful designer, interior designer—Jack is, and he says this himself, he's an actor, singer, dancer, who's never really held a job, right? (laughs) He doesn't have a retirement account, he doesn't have a regular income. And yet, you still love him because he's a basket case and he's unable to kind of rise up to the occasion and integrate into mainstream middle-class society, holding down a job, having a committed relationship—he's polyamorous, he goes from man to man—and he doesn't kind of fit into that chronology, or what we call teleology, of progress in terms of "married with children." He's kind of a child, in terms of psychological development; he's certainly in arrested development, he's never really become adult. And we all have a part of us that is childlike, and that we return to from time to time, whether it's during the holidays, or whether it's with our own children.

So there's a queerness there in the sense that Jack has not kind of entered into the norm of society, and Karen, I think, is the quintessential example of that. She's married, but we never see her husband onscreen. So we never know anything about the relationship, except by what

she tells us about the relationship. And so she has a husband, but she's sexually interested in—and easily excited on screen by—potential lovers, both male and female. She drinks incessantly, and I don't think we should mock alcoholism, but she does it in a way that is comical. And she's not necessarily a good mother. She's got stepchildren, she forgets their names, she expresses affection for them by having the nanny read bedtime stories to them, and so in some ways, she's an outsider from normative society as well.

And those moments of queerness in the show, I think, bring some relief to those of us as spectators who feel the pressure of integrating into mainstream society, and I don't mean just gay and lesbian spectators, or LGBT spectators, but I mean anyone can relate to that, at a moment where you say, "I can't do this anymore, I can't be the super mom, I can't be the professor and raise children and make dinner." And so you kind of take a retreat in these characters who give you some comic relief about social norms.

MARY M. DALTON: Thank you, is there anything I haven't asked you about *Will and Grace* that you feel like we need to delve into?

DENIS PROVENCHER: That's a good question. So yeah, I would just say I would encourage the students to, if they haven't, see the very first episode from the pilot of *Will and Grace*, and then also, look at the very last episode from the last season of *Will and Grace*, and see how those two episodes kind of work as bookends in terms of this notion of normativity that we've talked about. I don't know if you remember the very final episode of season eight.

MARY M. DALTON: Oh yeah.

DENIS PROVENCHER: So Will and Grace end up bumping into each other many years later when their two children are off at college. Grace is helping her child move in and Will is helping his child move in, and we see the two characters reconcile after a period of time where they kind of lost touch. We think of these characters as always being best friends, and they've kind of evolved, as they've both kind of coupled with their own partners, they've moved in different spaces and they've lost touch. But I think what I find interesting is how the directors of the show chose a path in which the children of Will and Grace—we've got a male character and a female character children, I can't remember which character has what gender child—but Will and Grace's children find each other as freshmen, college freshmen in the same residence hall and you kind of imagine them falling in love and eventually having a love story that their parents were never able to. So in that way, normativity is still, is still a strong force in the way we tell stories on US television, at least in terms of mainstream network television.

MARY M. DALTON: Thank you so much.

DENIS PROVENCHER: You're welcome.

MARY M. DALTON: This has been really fun, I can't believe it took us over 10 years to meet.

DENIS PROVENCHER: Yeah, well, you know. That's how it goes sometimes.