

QUEERING THE FAMILY: KINSHIP, BLOOD RELATIONS AND MARRIAGE IN SHOWTIME'S *QUEER AS FOLK*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways in which the American television series *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) constructs queer families. The show responds to the social and cultural challenges faced by LGBT families and expresses differing attitudes to assimilationism and compulsory heterosexuality. By juxtaposing two traditional, though homosexual, family units with an anti-assimilationist worldview, *Queer as Folk* questions what *family* signifies. The essay analyzes the series' treatment of gay male versus lesbian kinship and sexuality, and its assumptions about gender, through the family as a central trope.

KEYWORDS

Queer as Folk (US); television series; queer studies; family; gay marriage; LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender)

Any discussion in an American context of the notion of “family” will necessarily be complicated by the troublesome relationship between the reality of a heterogeneous population on the one hand, and the desire for homogeneity on the other. In addition, it is impossible to define with any accuracy what a family is or is supposed to be,¹ but as Kath Weston points out, the “privileged construct” appears to be the heteronormative family paradigm.² Bernstein and Reimann state that “in 1998, only 6.7 percent of all households [in the US] fit the ‘traditional’ nuclear-family model.”³ With this statistic, it can seem rather curious that the issue of gay marriage and queer families is such a controversial one. Part of the explanation may lie in the notion of national myths or idealized perceptions of imagined communities. The US imagines itself as a community with a certain set of values rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Bernstein and Reimann further point out, “the privatized-nuclear family holds a sacred place in the American psyche and is embedded in most major social and legal institutions.”⁴

1. See Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Cheshire Calhoun, “Family Outlaws,” *Philosophical Studies* 85, no. 2–3 (1997): 181–93.

2. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 6.

3. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann, eds., *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 14.

4. Bernstein and Reimann, *Queer Families, Queer Politics*, 2.

The American TV series *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–2005) portrays queer families as anything but homogenous. By responding to the social and cultural challenges faced by LGBT families in the early (G. W.) Bush era with humorous allegory, the show promotes a multiple definition of what constitutes a family based on extended kinship and a redefinition of “blood relatives.” By situating the characters in what Rebecca Beirne calls a “homonormative environment,”⁵ the show constructs its lesbian and gay characters as the norm, while queering the heterosexual world. While the show does not represent all queer families as the same, the tendency towards representing one segment of the homosexual characters as assimilationist, adopting a “traditional” definition of the family, produces a certain homogeneity, which constructs the queer family as normative. In this way the show expresses a difference in queerness based on gender. Although the show attempts to stress inclusiveness and multiplicity, its treatment of lesbians is based on sexist notions about women. Although the two married couples—Melanie (Michelle Clunie) and Lindsay (Thea Gill), and Michael (Hal Sparks) and Ben (Robert Gant)—function as the most obvious comments on heteronormativity, the anti-heterosexual, defiantly queer Brian (Gale Harold) represents the anti-assimilationist point of view.

THE “HETEROS”

Even though the show purports to be realistic, it does in many ways, to borrow Cindy Patton’s words,⁶ construct the family unit in a parodic and campy way to reverse the roles of “queers” and “heteros.” Even if it portrays virtually no straight characters, the show constantly comments on the heterosexual world, and when straight characters are given time to develop, they are always queered—the gay characters often refer to them condescendingly as “breeders”—or they are presented as villains or failed couples, thus turning the stereotype of the “perverted” or dysfunctional homosexual on its head. Michael’s mother Debbie, the only non-queer character to appear in every episode, is a kitschy reversal of the typical, flamboyant, comic-relief gay character. The only other recurring straight character is Jennifer Taylor (Sherry Miller), the straight mother of Brian’s lover Justin. Jennifer, who dates a man half her age, represents the good but somewhat tragic straight woman, recently divorced and on Prozac. Together, these mothers are used as somewhat obvious juxtapositions to the more successful lesbian household, with “two dotting mothers” (Michael, 5.1) in a committed relationship.

5. Rebecca Beirne, “Mapping Lesbian Sexuality on *Queer as Folk*,” in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, edited by Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 99.

6. Cindy Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 143–77.

THE QUEERS

One of the show's biggest accomplishments is its contribution to the naturalization of homosexuality. However, the portrayal of "The Lesbians" as somehow separate from the "queer"—that is the gay male—realm is significant. *Queer as Folk*, not unlike other popular cultural artifacts, is a product of discourses. While it supposedly provides "an unvarnished treatment of gay life,"⁷ it remains a relatively partial treatment in that, as Rebecca Beirne states, it "enacts [a] heteronormative patriarchal discourse even as it queers it, by maintaining gender distinctions that privilege male narratives and sexuality over female ones."⁸ The portrayal of male homosexuals, although somewhat unrealistic, presents idiosyncratic and rounded characters, whereas the main lesbian characters are encoded as butches and femmes.⁹ In the first two seasons, Melanie and Lindsay are encoded almost exclusively as a butch/femme couple, with the traditional dichotomy of blond/brunette and passive/active, represented here as the femme, blonde, stay-at-home mom, Lindsay, and the butch, brunette, high-powered lawyer, Melanie.¹⁰ Moreover, the lesbians function mainly to illustrate to a straight audience that homosexuals are just like heterosexuals. As opposed to the five gay protagonists, the lesbians are almost exclusively portrayed in domestic or "traditionally" female cultural spaces. The first two seasons picture Lindsay almost entirely as a mother. Other than taking care of the son Gus and keeping a tidy home, Lindsay seems not to have a function or purpose in the story. Thus, as Beirne further explains, Melanie and Lindsay perform the role of "*oppositional force* against which gay male culture, posited by the series as queer culture, is constructed and celebrated."¹¹ The lesbian couple is represented as conforming to societal norms of women on the one hand and the two-parent home on the other, while the gay male characters inhabit a sexy and exciting queer world.

The feminine as "other" is further represented in the series in depictions of the lesbians as somehow naturally domestic and happily domesticated. With only a few exceptions, in the first three seasons, the couple exclusively inhabit the home sphere, situated in the living room, bedroom, or kitchen,

7. Rodger Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five": The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127.

8. Beirne, "Mapping Lesbian Sexuality," 99.

9. "Butches" refers to women who are categorized as adhering to societal standards of gender behavior usually attributed to men, and so are perceived to be un-feminine or man-like. "Femmes" refers to lesbians who seem to conform to society's standards of feminine behavior. This classification is, of course, highly problematic as it assumes that there are neat categories of femininity and masculinity, but also because the terms reinforce assumptions about lesbians being either "the man" or "the woman" in the relationship, thus indirectly privileging the heterosexual pattern of couples.

10. See Rebecca Beirne, *Lesbians in Television and Text after the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 90–93.

11. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 63. Emphasis in original.

preparing a meal, consuming a meal, cleaning, or discussing child rearing or whether to have another baby. In episode 3.9, even as they discuss the politics of lesbian motherhood as opposed to straight motherhood, the couple move through the house from the living room toward the bathroom. A scene like this displays stereotypical assumptions on two levels. On the explicit level, the lesbians' dialogue centers on why lesbian mothers need to be better than, not just as good as, straight mothers. This underlines the show's portrayal of the lesbians as conforming to societal norms of family units and also comments on assumptions about queer families as somehow inferior. On the implicit level, the lesbians are situated in a highly quotidian setting: folding laundry and taking care of a child. While the gay males are mostly portrayed in the bar Woodie's or the club Babylon, the lesbians only visit such establishments a few times; one "dyke-night," a couple of bachelor parties, including their own, and fundraisers for LGBT causes. As women, Melanie and Lindsay are coded as outside the queer—gay male—community, even while they often have superficial roles to play in direct community actions, such as benefits and the Liberty Ride fundraiser. As lesbians, they are coded as assimilationist, conforming to the hegemonic white, middle-class suburban family paradigm.

Furthermore, throughout the show, the lesbians "are peripheral to the major story lines . . . have little screen time, have less prominent sex lives than other characters and are often the subject of ridicule both on and off screen."¹² Especially the gay male characters often belittle and deprecate the lesbians either by calling them names or by expressing exaggerated disgust with lesbian sexual acts. For instance, on more than one occasion, Emmet and Ted make gagging noises and screwed-up faces on hearing the word "cunnilingus" (3.1), Michael shivers at the thought of lesbian sex (3.1), and his mother Debbie says with enormous dread, "I can't even imagine diving into a muff!" (5.5). By contrast, the depiction of gay male sex and sexuality is purposely alluring,¹³ while lesbian sexuality is relegated to the realm of the unacceptable and odd, which maintains the notion of lesbian sexuality as dangerous *feminine* desire.¹⁴

"BLOOD RELATIVES"

Queer as Folk pokes fun at and redefines in its own way the way the term 'blood relative' is to be understood. While the lesbians are deciding whether or not to have another child, their main concern is the biological father's identity. On the one hand, Lindsay wants both children to have the same father, i.e. to be related in the traditional sense, in case something happens to their mothers, while Melanie refuses to use the sperm of their son's biological father (3.3). The conflict between the two mothers' ideas about the father is further

12. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 61.

13. Michael Ausiello, "Queer Execs to Critics: *Folk* Off!" *TV Guide Online*, January 4, 2002, <http://www.tvguide.com/newsgossip/insider/020104a.asp>.

14. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 69–75.

complicated by the show's focus on what Beirne calls "the primacy of the father."¹⁵ The pilot (and first episode) of the show introduces the five gay male protagonists and especially the buddies Michael and Brian as central to the show. In this episode, Lindsay gives birth to Gus, fathered by Brian. During a scene at the hospital, the two biological parents share an intimate and not entirely platonic moment.¹⁶ Interestingly, the birth of their first child does not construct Melanie and Lindsay as a queer family; the scene rather works to construct Brian as a father. The focus quickly shifts from the newborn and the happy mothers to Brian's realization that his life is forever changed. In fact, Melanie is temporarily excluded from the family, as the framing of the scene produces Lindsay and Brian as "[an] archetypal nuclear family unit."¹⁷ Furthermore, as a comic reversal in the next season, Lindsay asks Brian to pose as her husband in order to get Gus into a good preschool, assuming that he was excluded from their first choice because of discrimination. The second preschool also turns down Gus, but this time in favor of a child with same-sex parents. Lindsay regrets not taking Melanie to the interview and says, "It should have been you and me in there . . . first thing tomorrow, we're gonna look for another school. And this time, Gus' parents—Lindsay and Melanie—will go to the interview" (2.13). Lindsay's revelation about their family, therefore, critiques the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. This incident propels the story of Melanie and Lindsay as the real family seen throughout the rest of the show, thus deconstructing the notion of "family" as a biological entity.

This privileging of the biological, seen in the early episodes, is further deconstructed later in the show when Melanie (in cooperation with Lindsay) chooses Brian's best friend Michael as the father of *her* child. In this way, the show relies on an idea of "family" in broad terms of non-biological kinship and not in genetic terms. The constructed nature of "family" as "chosen families,"¹⁸ which is portrayed in this show, is, moreover, explained in almost every other scene involving families and blood relations. The "folk" of *Queer as Folk* are not just friends, but frequently refer to each other as family and biological family members are very rarely even known, much less presented as important in their lives. Biological fathers, particularly, are either represented as absent, abusive, or actively objecting to the role of family man. The three fathers, other than Brian, that have minor roles to play fall neatly into these categories. Therefore, chosen family—the people whom you choose and who choose you—becomes more important than genetic family, which is portrayed as accidental and, in many ways, inconsequential. For instance, it turns out in episode 2.13 that Michael's mother Debbie has been lying to him about his real father all his life, but even after he finds out his

15. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 63.

16. See Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 76–77.

17. Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 76.

18. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose*, 109–11.

real father is a drag queen Debbie knew in high school, Michael accepts the story of his fake father, the fallen Vietnam war hero, as true because it is the family image Debbie has chosen. Likewise, the lesbians choose to construct their version of the middle-class two-parent two-kids family without regard for genetic connections.

When Melanie and Lindsay temporarily “dissolve” as a couple in the last season (5.3), the issue of child custody rears its ugly head. As the biological parents of the daughter JR, Michael and Melanie hire lawyers to settle the dispute. Lindsay is initially left out of the matter, but later comes to play a prominent role. The key conflict emerges when Michael expresses misogynist attitudes stating that a child is better off with two dads than a single mother, prompting his own single mom, Debbie, to set him straight, in a characteristic sarcastic rant, “I was a single mother and—guess what? You still had the sense to come in out of the rain . . . You think that just ‘cause there are two of you, you’re better equipped to raise a kid . . . Let me tell you two ‘experts’ something: Not everyone is fortunate to have a partner and enough money to stay home and raise their kid . . . So if you think you can do better, all I can say is: good for you” (5.2). Finally, the issue is resolved when, fearing she will be excluded as the non-birth-mother with no legal claims to the baby, Lindsay hires her own lawyer and the three of them end up sharing custody equally. The lawyer at one point states that, “It used to be the definition of mother was simple. It was the dear lady who gave birth to you” (5.3). This simple biological definition is further deconstructed throughout the rest of the season, especially when Lindsay proves in true King Solomon fashion (1 Kings 3:16–28) that she, unlike Michael and Melanie, who bicker over whose turn it is to “have the baby,” puts the baby’s welfare above her own (5.5).

In similar fashion, in the Michael and Ben family, the idea of blood relatives takes on a weightier and somewhat more sinister meaning. That Ben is HIV positive and Michael is not is the main cause of conflict in their relationship, which is further complicated when Melanie and Lindsay choose Michael to father their second child—something Ben will never be able to do. When the teenage hustler and HIV positive Hunter squeezes his way into their lives and makes an impression on Ben, Michael wonders out loud why a stranger can inspire such affectionate feelings in Ben. Ben, who has already decided to offer Hunter a place to live, asks, “Am I supposed to let him sleep on the street on one of the coldest nights of the year?” and Michael responds, “You hardly know him!” Ben dryly but poignantly responds: “Well, actually we’re related—by blood” (3.11). This redefinition of blood relative is elaborated when Hunter’s abusive mother resurfaces and threatens to break up the family (3.14). Michael and Ben emerge as Hunter’s true parents after his mother rejects him upon discovering his HIV positive status, and they later officially adopt him. HIV not only functions as a metaphorical blood tie, it also becomes a mark of separation as the plot unfolds. By privileging alternative forms of non-biological kinship the show offers an anti-assimilationist stance to the heteronormative surrounding society.

THE MARRIAGE ISSUE

One way to gain legitimacy as a family is by way of marriage. Both the wedding ceremony and the institution symbolize to the world a lasting commitment, but more importantly marriage confers numerous rights and offers certain benefits with regard to taxes, health insurance and family planning, and many other matters.¹⁹ In far from subtle comments on political issues such as the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and California's Proposition 22, *Queer as Folk* offers several comments on and critiques of the restrictive laws of the US and the apparent attitudes of the public. Most evident are the two central couples' marriages and the season five plotline (5.7–5.13) concerning "Proposition 14," a bigoted initiative proposed by the conservative "Family America" organization. The proposition, in somewhat hyperbolic fashion, would strip queer families of *all* rights by "dissolv[ing] a broad range of contracts between same-sex couples" (5.7), such as the right to second-parent adoption, marriage, and health benefits. This storyline comments very directly on the early Bush-era attempts to amend the constitution with the Federal Marriage Amendment defining the notion of marriage as exclusively a union between one man and one woman, as well as the Proposition 22 referendum, passed during the show's first season.²⁰

With the marriage theme, the "othering" of the lesbians is again significant. Although both of the couples get married in one way or another, the lesbians in particular are encoded as "embrac[ing] white, middle-class, straight, suburban American norms."²¹ Even though Melanie initially takes a more anti-assimilationist, feminist stance, calling marriages "antiquated rituals for heterosexuals" (2.1), Melanie and Lindsay hold a civil union ceremony, which at the same time both mocks and conforms to heteronormative standards. By donning the almost clichéd white gown and tuxedo, Lindsay and Melanie, respectively, seem to parody the heterosexual ritual. Furthermore, the plotline dealing with their commitment ceremony takes half a season to develop and includes several bouts of neuroses, cold feet and ruined expectations, whereas Michael and Ben's road to marriage—and significantly *legal* marriage—unfolds over one episode. This difference in time can be ascribed to the show's privileging of the male over the female. Ben and Michael's union is seen as an expression of love, whereas the lesbians' union symbolizes bureaucracy and domestic entanglements—represented by various scenes depicting the signing of contracts (2.4) and struggling

19. See Andrew J. Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (2004): 848–61; Debra L. DeLaet and Rachel Paine Caufield, "Gay Marriage as a Religious Right: Reframing the Legal Debate over Gay Marriage in the United States," *Polity* 40, no. 3 (2008): 297–320.

20. The Federal Marriage Amendment bill was defeated in Congress in 2004. Many scholars and critics have seen the proposed amendment as an indication that conservatives are unhappy with DOMA. See Edward Ashbee, *The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 86–95.

21. Bernstein and Reimann, *Queer Families, Queer Politics*, 5.

for acceptance from Lindsay's parents (2.7). The lesbians' struggle is thus juxtaposed with the guys' spur-of-the-moment, romantic decision²²; that is, Ben proposes and they get married on a charity bike ride to Toronto, where gay marriage is legal.

In a somewhat more militant manner, the anti-conformist character, Brian Kinney, advocates complete separatism and promotes truly Queer (family) values. In many ways his attitude towards the straight world is reminiscent of Queer Nationalists' semi-separatist ideology.²³ Allowing his on-and-off-again lover Justin to move in, Brian states, "don't get the idea we're some kind of married couple. We're not like fucking straight people. . . . We're queers, . . . we're together . . . because we wanna be" (2.6). After they break up and when Michael and Ben buy a house together, Justin moves in with them temporarily. In a drunken rant, Brian attacks Michael verbally, calling their marriage "a farce" and claims that they are deluding themselves into thinking the straight world will ever accept them on an equal footing (5.7). This scene is neither the first nor the last in which Brian raves about the "heteros," a term he always uses with a certain sneering and sarcastic tone. The most oft-repeated line of the show—"We're queer"—belongs to Brian and it becomes a type of chorus or slogan separating him and the other truly "queer" characters from, especially, the domesticated, assimilationist "ladies who munch" (Leda, 2.7). Throughout the series, Brian and Michael are juxtaposed as two ways to lead queer lives and two views on the issue of LGBT rights. Michael seeks acceptance and integration, while Brian deliberately battles it. Michael wants a home and a family, while Brian refers to marriage as "suicide pacts" (4.13). One of the show's clearest examples occurs in episode 4.13, where the two friends argue over gay rights and, specifically, Michael and Ben getting married. When Michael expresses apprehension about marrying Ben, Brian asks, "What's stopping you? Besides the fact it's the most pathetic idea I've ever heard Since when do you have the least interest in getting married?" He continues, "We're queer! We don't need marriage; we don't need the sanction of dick-less politicians and pederast priests. We fuck who we want to when we want to. It's our God-given right" (4.13). In a later episode, Brian refers to marriage as tying a "noose around [ones'] necks" (5.7). Michael, on the other hand, admits he always wanted to get married but never thought he could. He defends his stance by saying that gay people "deserve every bit the same rights as straight people, because [they]'re every bit as human . . ." and "it's also our God-given right to have everything straight people have!" (4.13). However absurdly corny the comment might be, the whole exchange neatly sums up the show's often ambivalent stance on the gay rights issue, as both a quest for equality and a struggle for separatism. As Kath Weston points out,

22. See Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*, 84.

23. Rebecca Beirne, "Embattled Sex: Rise of the Right and Victory of the Queer in *Queer as Folk*," in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming*, ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 43–58.

the alternative families can “be read simultaneously as radically innovative and thoroughly assimilationist. In the end, they are intrinsically neither.”²⁴

In season three (2003), a more antagonistic and political storyline develops which exposes anti-gay political ideology and provokes reassessments of dangerous notions of compulsory heterosexuality. In Pittsburgh’s mayoral election, the favorite is a police chief by the name of Jim Stockwell, whose platform focuses on “family values” and “cleaning up Pittsburgh” to make it a safe place, in what Glyn Davis calls “an echo of Rudy Giuliani’s efforts to Disneyfy Times Square in New York.”²⁵ True to his usual form, Brian exploits the situation and becomes the bigoted chief’s ad-man. Stockwell and his people do not directly attack the gay community as immoral, but initiate a process of “cleaning up” the gay neighborhood around Liberty Avenue to promote “wholesome values” (3.8) by closing bathhouses and bars for minor offenses. In the final episode of the season, Brian laments, “It used to be such a magical kingdom full of sprites and fairies” (3.14)—a queer haven that he sets out to restore. Brian thus emerges at the end of the season as the victorious, allegorical Everyman, saving the queer community from an evil politician out to infringe on personal liberties, a story that functions as an extended metaphor for the anti-gay sentiments and legislation of the early Bush years, possibly commenting on the proposed Marriage Amendment, which was finally defeated in 2004.²⁶ By utilizing this secondary plot, the show, “hail[s] the viewer to identify with the [queer] characters and dissociate from the homophobic characters,”²⁷ in an effort to promote greater acceptance. In addition, the show illustrates that it leans more toward a pluralist—or queer—stance towards identity politics, even though it may on the surface appear to be assimilationist with its focus on its “ersatz heterosexual” couples (5.3).

Finally, this insistence on inclusiveness and pluralism of attitudes is further illustrated in the final episodes of season five (2005). At a political benefit to promote gay marriage and protest against discrimination, an anti-gay terrorist attack nearly kills Michael, after which he is invited to speak at a press conference organized by anti-Proposition-14 activists. Michael foils the organizers’ plan to exhibit Ben, Hunter, and him as an example of upstanding heteronormative queer families by veering away from the prepared speech. When he becomes aware that his mother and colorful, flamboyant friends have been asked to sit in the back in order to make room for more normative gay families in the front—a show for the cameras—Michael decides to speak out. In the unscripted part of the speech, he states, “Being different is what makes

24. Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.

25. Glyn Davis, *Queer as Folk* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 122.

26. See Ashbee, *The Bush Administration*, 86–95.

27. Rebecca Beirne, introduction to *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 10.

us all the same, what makes us family” (5.13), referring to the assorted queer characters he associates with on a daily basis. The message is heavy-handed and clumsy. However, in the political climate of 2005—after the previous decade’s constant attempts to amend the constitution barring gays from marrying, the desexualized queers presented in television’s “representational arena,”²⁸ and continued widespread homophobia—it seems justified to use inelegant and unambiguous phrases.

CONCLUSION

“Marriage—straight people deserve it,” Leda, the lesbian ex-girlfriend of Melanie observes at Lindsay and Melanie’s bachelorette party, after witnessing a spat between the soon-to-be “married munchers.” Her comment functions first and foremost as comic relief, but it also illustrates how the show remains fairly divided in its attitude towards the institution of marriage. Leda functions as a counter to Melanie and Lindsay as domesticated women, much as Brian does to Ben and Michael as “ersatz heterosexuals.” Melanie and Lindsay’s union is at once a celebration of their love and a parody of the “nuclear family,” complete with a statistically realistic divorce—or a dissolving, as Melanie calls it.

The inclusiveness the show promotes is illustrated by its use of HIV as a trope of community. By redefining blood relatives to include chosen families based on social stigma and otherness, the series promotes pluralism and the tolerance of disparate values. *Queer as Folk*’s ultimate view on queer families is mainly resistant to dominant discourses, further represented in the series’ finale by Melanie and Lindsay leaving the country for good and Michael and Ben returning to the fabulous decadence of the gay dance club Babylon, to illustrate that queer families are not just homosexual versions of the straight nuclear family model, but a construct of resistance and a symbol of the fallacy of “traditional” paradigms. In short, the show objects to the notion of the family being a compulsory heterosexual entity.

Although the show had a limited audience because of its Sunday night timeslot and the network *Showtime*, its popular culture form provides a powerful weapon as a mediator. As Nancy Naples points out, because “destabilizing the powerful hegemony of heteronormativity involves daily negotiations, strategic choices, and a commitment to challenging heterosexual privilege in everyday life,”²⁹ the show’s portrayals of a multiplicity of queer identities and family patterns add to the current debate about LGBT rights.

28. Giovanni Porfido, “*Queer as Folk* and the Spectacularization of Gay Identity,” in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 59.

29. Nancy A. Naples, “Queer Parenting in the New Millennium,” *Gender & Society* 18, no. 6 (2004): 683.

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