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“Bad Girls Changed My Life”: Homonormativity in a Women’s Prison Drama

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Abstract: This paper explores representations of sexuality in a popular British television drama. The author argues that the program in question, *Bad Girls*, a drama set in a women’s prison, conveys a set of values that are homonormative. In other words, unlike other mainstream television products that may have lesbian or gay characters within a prevailing context of heteronormativity, *BG* represents lesbian sexuality as normal, desirable, and possible. At the same time, *BG* reproduces dominant understandings of social relations in other areas, particularly around race. The broader significance of the series lies in its impact on viewers’ lives, its nonconformity with dominant “gay market” images, and its significance as a space within popular culture from which meanings of gender and sexuality can be contested.

Keywords: *n/a*

Episode 7, debut season:

(Helen enters library where Nikki is reading.)

Helen: *Romeo and Juliet* – I’m impressed.

Nikki: *Juliet and Juliet* would be more my cup of tea.

Helen: ... Have you never been interested in men?

Nikki: Not my flavour, no.

Helen: But, I thought ...

Nikki: What? – I just hadn’t met the right one? No, they do nothing for me.

Helen: How can you be sure?

Nikki: The same way as you are ... if you are.

Helen: I’m not interested in women – not in that way.

Nikki: Well, you should give it a go sometime. Don’t know what you’re missing.

(Nikki hands Helen a copy of Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges are not the only fruit* and exits.)

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In 1999, *Bad Girls* (BG) premiered on ITV, Britain's main commercial television network. By the time of the third season in 2001 BG, a women's prison drama, was attracting over eight million viewers each week of its 16-week run, and had spawned fan websites, special events, media cover stories, and its own book (Reynolds & McCallum, 2001). It was the fifth most popular drama in the post-9pm slot, and amongst under-35s held the top position in this time slot (BARB, 2001). The series has been sold to markets in Finland, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, and South Africa, and "changed format" versions sold in Spain and the United States, where feminist film producer Christine Vachon has purchased the rights (Eileen Gallagher, Shed Productions, personal communication, November 1, 2001). In the United Kingdom, BG video sales stood at number seven in the chart during June 2000, ahead of *Friends* and *Buffy*, and just behind *Star Trek* and *The Simpsons* (BARB, 2001).

Over its four years, BG has followed the stories of a range of characters, inmates and officers. It focuses critically on issues such as prison healthcare, officer violence, and the institutional sexism faced by employees, while simultaneously constructing a "camped up" environment often giving rise to outrageous dialogue and subplots. Woven throughout every episode are scenes representing the prison as a place of warmth, solidarity, and community for the women incarcerated there. While there are many strands to the show across its four years, I focus on one: the ways in which BG centers, validates, and normalizes lesbian sexuality.¹

My analysis highlights two characters in particular – Helen Stewart and Nikki Wade. Helen is a white, heterosexual prison manager, trying to reform prison practice in the face of resistance from the "old boy network." Nikki, a white, lesbian prisoner, is serving a long, discretionary sentence for killing a police officer whom she found raping her girlfriend. Helen is very aware of the institutional struggles she faces, while Nikki is an outspoken activist who commands respect within the prison. The two women fall in love with each other, and a key storyline throughout the first three series charts the ups and downs of their relationship. By the end of the third season, Helen has given up her job to safeguard Nikki's appeal, Nikki is released from prison, and Helen finally acknowledges she "wants a woman."

Analyses of lesbian images in mainstream television are still few and far between (Dow, 2001). Some writers argue that lesbians either do not exist, or that their representation is largely unsatisfactory in a range of ways (Collis, 1994; Gross, 1998; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Moritz, 1994; Straayer, 1984). Others analyze and advocate readings in or against "the grain," conjuring lesbian narrative out of what first appears to be rather thin air (Doty, 1993; Farwell, 1996; Johnson, 1993; Nataf, 1995; Smyth, 1995). A third and overlapping approach is to deconstruct homophobic and spectral representations (Castle, 1995; Collis, 1994; Hart, 1994; Mayne, 2000) in cultural products never intended to show lesbians positively nor directed at lesbian viewers as "a knowing part of the mainstream audience" (Florence, 1995, p. 144; see also Gray on "race," 1995, p. 95).

A significant proportion of scholarship on lesbian images in popular culture explores the women in prison (WIP) genre, a category that BG, at first glance,

appears to occupy neatly (Hart, 1994; Mayne, 2000; Morey, 1995). Most of this writing focuses on film, although it includes a small body of work analyzing the popular Australian television series Prisoner Cell- Block H (Zalcock & Robinson, 1996). Judith Mayne has argued that the WIP film genre contains a fairly simple formula that involves a relatively innocent, heterosexual heroine being sent to prison and subsequently abused by women she encounters there (Mayne, 2000). Lesbianism is usually either marginalized, pathologized, or at best situational, and lesbian characters usually face grim futures or suffer violent deaths (Hart, 1994; Mayne, 2000). Even Cheryl Dunye's *Stranger Inside*, a "progressive" film made for HBO in 2002, is arguably ambiguous as to whether its same-sex sex is about lesbian identity or desire beyond the prison situation.

In contrast, BG disrupts the WIP genre significantly. BG foregrounds lesbian heroines who have happy endings, and the normalization of lesbianism occurs outside as well as within the prison. Much, although by no means all, of the abuse inmates suffer is at the hands of male officers. Mayne has suggested that one of the most striking aspects of the WIP genre "is how marginal male figures really are" (2000, p. 118) – this is simply not true of BG, where several male characters play an important role in advancing the show's feminist agenda.

Hugely successful in the prime time market, BG was developed and continues to be creatively controlled by two women who have described themselves as "straight-down-the-line, dyed-in-the-wool, committed, door-die, go-to-the-wall, in-your-face feminists" (Chadwick & McManus, 2001). Yet in contrast to arguably feminist, mainstream dramas like *Cagney and Lacey* (D'Acci, 1994; Dow, 1996), BG, I suggest, constructs lesbian sexuality as normative. Unlike niche market offerings that may also do this, such as lesbian independent cinema or lifestyle products (Lewis, 1997), *Bad Girls* is produced under the auspices of the UK's major commercial broadcaster and transmitted during prime time to millions of viewers each week. Moreover, in a departure from other television series with lesbian or gay characters, such as the United Kingdom's *Casualty*, *Brookside* or *Emmerdale*, or in the United States *Buffy*, *Ellen*, *ER*, or *Will and Grace*, *Bad Girls*, I argue, does not offer up its gay characters for a predominantly heterosexual audience to scrutinize and distance itself from (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Byers, 1998; Dow, 2001). Nor, like *Xena*, does BG create a covert, highly coded space of potential same-sex desire (Hamming, 2001; Morreale, 1998). On the contrary, BG, up to a point, is more like *Queer as Folk* (Munt, 2000); both series, in similar yet very different ways, construct an overt "insider's view," a homonormative space where lesbian and gay sexuality is both unremarkable and, potentially, desirable. However, *Queer as Folk*, in both its British and American incarnations, is overwhelmingly male-centered.²

As the subtitle of this paper suggests, I will argue that *Bad Girls* has succeeded in constructing a prime time lesbian homonormativity – by which I mean that the show not only takes lesbianism for granted, but also presents lesbian sexuality as commonsense desire (Marshment & Hallam, 1994; Patton, 1995). I develop this argument largely through exploration of the show's ideologies, or dominant ways of understanding social relations (see White, 1992). Specifically, I ask the following questions: What are the lesbian images conveyed in this prime time television show? Through what normative lens is BG framed? What other norms are

advanced in BG, and how do these relate to representations of sexuality? In other words, how is BG's homonormativity inflected by ideologies of race and class, for example? Although Judith Roof (1996) has suggested that the relationship between narrative and sexuality is sufficiently complex to warrant the bracketing of "other terms," my argument proceeds on the basis that there is no such thing as sexuality uninflected by, for example, race and class.

Homonormative Constructions

Within lesbian/gay/queer theory, the term "heteronormativity" is often used, but rarely conceptualized explicitly (Adam, 1998). Heteronormativity encompasses, at a basic level, the view that heterosexuality is natural and normal for individuals and society; however, total heteronormativity may never be fully achieved and therefore heteronormative societies often have to sustain heterosexuality as a political project. In such cases, heteronormativity also includes an injunction that people ought to be heterosexual. Equally importantly, heteronormativity is an epistemological project – it shapes what we know and how we know it. In other words, heteronormativity does not just construct a norm, it also provides the perspective through which we know and understand gender and sexuality in popular culture (Cooper, 2002; Epstein & Steinberg, 1997).

In relation to television, with the exception of one-off specials or Queer as Folk, even shows with "gay characters" in the lead (as opposed to series with a gay/lesbian character), such as the American shows *Ellen* or *Will and Grace*, are heteronormative in that the sexuality of the gay characters is on display for the scrutiny/pleasure of a predominantly straight audience. Their gayness is presented as either an issue (*Ellen*), or as a source of humour (*Will and Grace*), and, at best, is confined within a liberal, heteronormative space of tolerance (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001). Even a series like *Buffy*, which has a large feminist and lesbian following and, arguably, successfully subverts the "male gaze" (Daugherty, 2001), is heteronormative in this sense. In contrast, a homonormative perspective, such as that found within gay and lesbian literature and independent cinema, represents gay and lesbian identity as normal, natural, good, and unremarkable in and of itself. Homonormativity may contain an injunction that people ought to be gay (see, for example, 1970s lesbian feminist music and political writing), and may also construct other sexualities as aberrant or distinctive in some way. Homonormativity presents "out" ways of looking that are rooted in lesbian and gay subcultures. Certainly, I am not suggesting that there is one lesbian or gay subculture. I argue that BG is located in a white, lesbian feminist homonormativity rather than, for example, one that is gay male, queer, or "of color."

A Lesbian Heroic

Sally Munt has argued that outlaw status is emblematic of a particular lesbian heroic (Munt, 1998). In BG, this heroism is personified in the character of Nikki, an out inmate. Nikki's centrality to the show, her role as a moral center within the prison, is an important aspect of BG's homonormativity. Nikki's role in befriending and protecting vulnerable inmates is a crucial aspect to her heroism; it is a pattern repeated often, and it is related to her leadership role in the prison generally.

Although Nikki at times resents the position of trust and authority in which she is placed, her concern for inmates' welfare is presented in a wholly positive manner. For example, Nikki warns a young prisoner about an abusive prison officer, she assists another after a "decrutching" episode, she helps two older women come to terms with their incarceration and acts as an important catalyst for each to change in a positive way, she physically intervenes to save inmates in dangerous situations, and she even consoles and counsels a good prison officer at one point.

Additionally, and as important as her concern for individual inmates, Nikki is also the political conscience of the show. Again, this is set up from the first episode, where Nikki challenges the prison authorities over their treatment of Carol, who has had a miscarriage during the night and been left to bleed in her cell. It is when faced with the inhumanity of the system that Nikki's temper and impulsive behavior emerge, often leading to her being sent "down the block" (put into segregation). Other inmates clearly respect Nikki as an important advocate and activist within the prison, and she is used by the program's writers to comment critically on a range of issues affecting women in prison, including prison healthcare, the incarceration of women forced to abandon vulnerable children, and the treatment of non-English speaking inmates. In contrast to heteronormative genres where the lesbian is often portrayed as out to get something (sex, power, and so on), Nikki is presented as a thoroughly decent, caring, committed, and in many respects, selfless person. Even so, Nikki does not appear as some kind of saint; she is tempestuous, impulsive, and sometimes jealous and possessive. We learn early on that she is imprisoned for the brutal, and arguably unnecessary, killing of a police officer, whom she found raping her partner. In this sense, there is no straightforward "deification" of Nikki – a problem Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2001) identify with positive images of lesbians and gay men.

That Nikki is a lesbian heroine is signalled early on, initially through the device of another character's homophobia (Shell). In episode 1 of the first season, Shell calls out as Nikki checks on Carol, "missed your goodnight kiss?" Later in the same episode, when Nikki has been stripped and sent to segregation, Shell exclaims "not wearing your dress then?" These remarks continue throughout the first season, for example in episode 3 when Shell passes Nikki and Monica on the stairs and says, "Going for someone a bit more upmarket are you Wade? ... What's she got the other girls ain't – mink instead of beaver?" The thoroughly bad prison officer, Jim Fenner, is the other key lesbian-baiter, and his and Shell's taunts play an important role in valorizing Nikki's lesbianism for, as I discuss below, their own heterosexuality (and sexual relationship with each other) is represented as dysfunctional, abusive, and out of control. Aside from this homophobia, Nikki's lesbianism is outed to viewers early in the debut season when she is visited by Trish, her partner. Thus, in contrast to Hart's analysis of typical lesbian representations in popular culture, there is no secret here waiting to be revealed (Hart, 1994).

The other heroine in BG, at least for the first and third seasons, is Helen, the governor of the prison wing. Helen's heroism is found partly in the Cagney and Lacey style and most assuredly not in the WIP genre – she is a feminist crusader, seeking personally to break the glass ceiling in the prison service, and politically to force the service to respond more effectively to inmates' needs. While Helen

battles against instances of individual officer corruption, many of her most important struggles are with her own boss's condescension, patronization, and refusal to oust the "bad apple" officers. In episode 1 of the first season, she explicitly attempts to enlist Nikki's help to fight the "old boys' network." Indeed, it is Helen and Nikki's feminist politics that initially creates a bond between them. As Clark (1990) has argued in a different context, the integration of the personal and political is what constitutes feminist heroism in popular culture.

Although Helen's sexual dithering and inconstancy were serious sources of disquiet to many lesbian BG viewers (expressed often on the BG message boards), her valiant attempts to feminize the prison service are heroic if, in the end, doomed to failure. She suffers a litany of discrimination and sexist abuse, including sexual assault, and continues to fight back. Arguably, Helen's institutional struggle serves to construct the prison not simply as a place of oppression, but also as a place of feminist heroics, like Cagney and Lacey's police station (Whitlock, 1994). Helen too is not a perfect heroine by any means; her motivations are not always clear, and she appears to enjoy exercising power over others. Indeed, the inability of network executives to read Helen (they found her incoherent and unpredictable) nearly led to her character being written out of the series (Maureen Chadwick & Ann McManus, Shed Productions, personal communication, November 1, 2001), and may also be an effect of BG's failure to conform to a recognizable genre. However, for many women, and particularly feminist viewers, Helen is a character with whom we can empathize, and one who deserves our respect and admiration. That she chooses to come out at the end of the third season only serves to strengthen the homonormative narrative – both of these key BG heroines choosewomen.

The lesbian heroic BG constructs, however, is a white one. The only non-white lesbian character, Denny, is introduced as a nasty bully, and although she eventually becomes sympathetic and likeable, she remains slow-witted, selfish, and naive. There are also class ideologies at play here. While the class backgrounds of Nikki and Helen are ambiguous, Helen is university-educated and Nikki soon will be. They share an interest in "good" literature and Nikki is found often in the library. In contrast, Denny is illiterate, and while she acquires literacy in a later season, she is never shown reading in the library. To picture Nikki or Helen as black or Asian, for example, or Denny reading novels in the library, challenges what is, in essence, the white lesbian normativity of BG. And yet, it is also important to complicate the meaning of "white." Nikki and Helen are played by actors with non-English backgrounds. These non-Anglo – and therefore "off" white in an English national context – identities complicate any simple reading of a dominant racial narrative in BG.³

The Coming Out Story

Helen's relationship with Nikki, and her ensuing sexuality dilemma, which takes three years to resolve, is one of the key themes of *Bad Girls*. Judith Roof has noted that "the quintessential lesbian narrative is the coming out story," (Roof, 1996, p. 104) and BG is no exception in deploying what Roof believes to be this inherently problematic tool. She suggests the coming out story functions conservatively because it offers a narrative of individual identity- affirmation that

does little to disturb “heterosexual systems” (1996, p. 107). I want to suggest that the coming out story in BG appears to confirm Roof’s critique as the series unfolds, but in fact its final resolution takes quite a different turn.

In the initial stages of their friendship in the first season, Helen is represented as not recognizing her growing feelings for Nikki, although she openly acknowledges Nikki’s sexuality, and she is keen to appear non-homophobic. When Nikki tries to discuss their mutual attraction in episode 7, Helen is quick to declare not only her heterosexuality and imminent marriage, but also tells Nikki that “everything I have done for you I have done for professional reasons.” However, Helen continues to seek Nikki out, and in episode 9 they eventually kiss. Helen is thrown into great confusion and, in the next episode, she calls Nikki into her office, ostensibly to discuss an exam Nikki is taking for her distance-learning university degree.

Nikki: Thought you’d given up taking an interest in me, miss.

Helen: Oh, look.

Nikki: Why’ve you been avoiding me then?

Helen: You know what I’m avoiding.

Nikki: Why don’t you tell me?

Helen: Oh for goodness sake, Nikki. All I’ve been trying to do is to help you to do yourself some good. Because I don’t want you to waste your potential ... You had no right taking advantage of me.

Nikki: Well, put me down the block then, go on. Rule 47, subsection 16, being disrespectful to the wing governor – by kissing her. Or do you expect me to apologize? (Nikki goes to leave)

Helen: Nikki stop. Honestly, I’m telling you, if you carry on like this one of us is going to have to leave Larkhall. I mean it.

Although the 2000 season begins with Helen still in denial about her feelings for Nikki, episode 2 ends with Helen resigning her job, acknowledging to Nikki that she can no longer fight her emotions, and kissing her, this time without any hesitation or regret. For the rest of this season and most of the next, however, Helen still appears to identify as straight, despite her relationship with Nikki. She also expresses a number of reservations about lesbianism, in terms of her own identity and sense of her future.

At the start of the third season, Helen ends her relationship with Nikki, saying “we’ve got to let go.” It is not clear whether Helen’s primary motivation for ending it comes from her professional/personal role conflict, or whether, as she puts it, their feelings are “too strong” and she cannot handle them. Although there are several hints that she may still be in love with Nikki, Helen enters a serious relationship with Thomas, the new prison doctor, who appears to play the familiar role of the male intermediary destined to thwart the women’s love (Straayer, 1995) and confirm a heroine’s heterosexuality (Hart, 1994) – but this is not the case.

In the sixteenth and final episode of this season, entitled “Coming Out,” Helen’s dithering again comes to the fore. As Nikki is about to go to court for her appeal case, Helen tells her “forget about me,” and says goodbye. Helen goes out to dinner with Thomas, who accuses her of “not even being honest with yourself,” in

relation to her feelings for Nikki. The next day, Nikki's lawyers (both women) win her appeal, and we see Helen drinking alone in a bar, watching the story on the television news. Helen then arrives at Nikki's victory party, although she quickly leaves, believing Nikki to have re-united with Trish, her previous partner. Nikki follows Helen out on to the street, and invites her back in for a drink.

Helen: Thomas and I split up. I've been such an idiot.

Nikki: I know what you're saying.

Helen: No, let me say it. Thomas is gorgeous, he's everything you'd want in a man. But I want a woman.

Nikki: We'll take things slowly.

Helen: Ya, dead slow. (they kiss)

Helen's coming out is thus completed in a scene that evokes the coming out genre while at the same time disturbing it. Helen does not say "I'm gay," or "I want you," but says, "I want a woman." She makes this statement in a public street, thus also breaking the containment of lesbianism within the prison, and using words very carefully chosen by the show's writers (Chadwick and McManus, personal communication, 2001). While Helen's dilemma is reminiscent of Evelyn's personal process in *Desert Hearts*, BG makes a stronger statement: Helen's storyline affirms a life choice, not just an instance of same-sex love. Despite the opportunity of a relationship with a perfect man (Chadwick & McManus, 2001), Helen does not want him, nor does she say she wants Nikki specifically (although this is clearly implied in the scene): what Helen wants is a woman.

The sexual agency of a "wanting" Helen stands in stark contrast to the "I'm gay" public confessional in *Ellen* (Dow, 2001), or Kerry Weaver's similar revelation in *ER* (see also Hantzis & Lehr, 1994). *Ellen*'s "I'm gay" follows the familiar pattern of the confessional identity claim. As Judith Roof has argued in a different context, "Its subversiveness is fleeting ... it is, in effect, already over, since its essence was the announcement of identity" (1996, p. 111). Helen's "I want" expresses desire not identity; the statement "I want a woman" is unusual but it is this very discordance that I would suggest disrupts the conventions of heteronormativity rather than reproducing them. It may also disrupt the commodification of identity by avoiding identity-claiming altogether. In this sense, BG constructs a homonormativity that other representations of prime time lesbians do not.

A Lesbian Feminist Perspective

BG's homonormativity is perhaps most advanced by the lens through which much of the action/dialogue is viewed. BG provides a space where lesbian feminist knowledge is an organizational principle, partly through having "a lesbian character as the [show's] reference point for the normal psyche" (Patton, 1995, pp. 20, 22). To paraphrase Marshment and Hallam (1994), lesbian identity is the basis of BG's commonsense. There are several specific ways in which BG's lesbian lens is highlighted. In the following discussion, I focus on five of these: diversity of representation, sexual agency, the portrayal of an erotically-charged love story with a happy ending, an insider commonsense, and the representation of family.

In terms of diversity of representation, *BG* parts company from similar genres by having several lesbian characters. Nikki, for example, is a business owner in her early thirties with access to economic resources. Denny, another member of the show's primary cast, is a young, working class lesbian of mixed-race heritage. Nikki and Denny have very little to do with each other in the show. While heteronormative perception might insist on these two characters hanging out together by virtue of their shared lesbianism, *BG*, instead, reflects a different order – other than being lesbians, these two women, who clearly mix in different class/social circles, have virtually nothing in common.

Unlike Nikki, Denny begins the series as a nasty bully. Also in contrast to Nikki, Denny's offence is not a crime of passion – she set fire to the children's home she lived in. Later, in the second season, Denny changes, becomes softer and far more likeable, and becomes involved with a new woman on the wing – Shaz. Shaz is also young, and in prison for employment-related manslaughter. While Nikki's crime is more conventionally lesbian in the women's prison genre sense, in that it is sexualized, arguably out of control violence, Denny and Shaz's convictions are different. Their violence is rooted in familial and workrelated despair. The lesbianism of all three is also entirely naturalized: it is taken for granted and unpathologized in any way. Indeed, as I discuss further below, the homophobia of bad characters stands out as unnatural.

In addition to these three women, as well as background same-sex couples, there are other, minor, lesbian characters in the show. *BG*'s creators were keen to show "bad" lesbians as well (Chadwick & McManus, 2001), and they did this primarily through the character of Mad Tessa Spall, who appears in one episode in the second season and again in the third. At first glance, Tessa is a lesbian at home in the women's prison genre – she is aggressive, mentally unbalanced, dangerous, and sexually obsessive. No other lesbian character in *BG* remotely resembles Tessa. Indeed, if lesbian viewers were to watch only the episodes in which Mad Tessa appears, it is possible that many would phone up the network to complain about the show's extreme homophobia. However, in the context of the series as a whole, the depiction of Tessa is rendered harmless (in homophobic terms), mainly because of the dominance of heroic Nikki, and fun, likeable Denny and Shaz, and partly because the Tessa scenes are such high camp. While the show's creators were unhappy with aspects of the direction of the actor playing Tessa (Chadwick and McManus, personal communication, 2001), Fiske (1987) has argued it may be just this sort of excess that facilitates oppositional readings. Mad Tessa's lesbian otherness is even further underlined by her attempt to bully Nikki, leading to a fight between the two, and Nikki losing prison privileges. Unsympathetic lesbians are also found in the Dedicated Search Team (DST), a prison officer drugs squad. Again, their contrast with "good" Nikki is highlighted by their abuse of her.

Second, the show's lesbian lens is sustained through the representation of Helen's sexual agency. Throughout the first season, Helen continually finds Nikki – in her cell, in the library, in the prison yard. In contrast to Evelyn and Cay's relationship in *Desert Hearts* (Stacey, 1995), for example, it is much later in the season that we see Nikki waiting for Helen, or trying to contact her, and then only rarely. Even Helen's fiancé', in episode 3, tells Helen that her interest in Nikki has become an

obsession. While a heteronormative look would render Nikki the initiator, and Helen the pursued, in BG the writers undertake a homonormative reversal. This is accomplished even more strongly during Helen and Nikki's sexual encounters. For example, when they spend the night together at Helen's home at the end of the second season (following Nikki's escape, disguised as a nurse), it is Helen who takes the sexual initiative, unbuttoning Nikki's uniform and beginning to undo her bra before the cut to another scene. Later, in bed, Nikki is cradled in Helen's arms, rather than the reverse. While this dynamic is more complicated than I have suggested – Nikki is hardly a passive onlooker – my point is simply that the idea of the heterosexual woman as the instigator of intimacy is more homo- than heteronormative.

Helen and Nikki's romance constitutes the third element of BG's lesbian perspective. As several commentators have noted in relation to popular culture, "images of lesbian sex are conspicuous by their absence" (Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 1993, p. 9; see also Collis, 1994; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Moritz, 1994). "It would seem," writes Jackie Stacey, "that the category of the popular lesbian romance ... is a virtual contradiction in terms" (1995, p. 112). But I would argue that this is just what BG constructs. Although the intimate scenes between Nikki and Helen are not graphic or prolonged by any means, they are firmly located in the show's lesbian feminist perspective. These scenes are erotic, without being exploitative in the WIP sense, and when, at the end of the second season, Nikki and Helen finally have sex in Helen's home (again disrupting the conventional WIP containment of lesbianism within the prison) it is an "amazing" experience for them both. Viewers on the BG message boards joke that their videotapes are worn out in these spots. While this is no doubt partly due to the almost complete absence of realistic, erotic, lesbian sex on mainstream television, I will go on to discuss (below) the way in which the appeal of these scenes contrasts with the mostly lurid, groping, unerotic depictions of heterosexuality in the show. Nikki and Helen's happy ending at the end of the 2001 season is another example of the show's homonormativity, standing in stark contrast to the usual forms of narrative closure for lesbian characters in popular television (Moritz, 1994).

A fourth aspect of BG's lesbian lens is the ubiquity of a gay and lesbian insider, commonsense, or, as Evans and Gamman (1995, p. 35) have argued in a different context, the appeal to lesbian "cultural competencies" (see also Lewis, 1997). One example of this occurs in episode 1 of the third season as Helen drives Nikki back to prison following her escape in a nurse's uniform. Nikki grabs the wheel, the car swerves, and they are stopped by a woman police officer. The officer sees Nikki's uniform and asks, "Are you nurses?" Helen smiles and nods, the officer looks from Helen to Nikki and clearly believes she recognizes fellow lesbian travellers. "You better get home to your bed then girls," she says, with a knowing wink. While heterosexual viewers may well read this scene as intended, it is clearly deeply embedded in a gay and lesbian "interpretive community" (Lewis, 1997, p. 95).

The high camp manner in which characters express homophobia may also appear as insider humor to a gay and lesbian audience. Shell's taunts to Nikki, for example in episode 7 of the 1999 season, are ludicrous and fundamentally unthreatening: "what's this about – lesbi love poems? ... what's up dyke, are ya

scared?” In episode 1 of the second season, Shell refers to Nikki as “the evil lezzie bitch,” and in episode 6, warns a new inmate against getting too close to Nikki.

Shell: New girlfriend, Wade? Who goes on top, you or her?

Nikki: Shut it Dockley.

Shell: (to Barbara) You haven't got a clue what's going on, have ya?

Barbara: I'm sorry, I don't understand.

Shell: Well, if you can't work it out for yourself darling, just keep your knickers on after dark, that's all.

Barbara: What?

Shell: (lapping tongue) Lezbo, ain't she?

Shell's representation of Nikki is so untrue to the Nikki viewers know, and so patently absurd, that it is far more likely to be read as funny than offensive – including by a gay and lesbian audience. Indeed, as Straayer (1995) notes, these sorts of counter-hegemonic (within the show's normative framework), homophobic intrusions can actually serve to homoeroticize the situation further.

An insider commonsense is also apparent in Nikki's expressions of frustration around being in love with a heterosexual woman. In episode 10 of the first season, during Helen's initial denial of her feelings for Nikki, Helen asks her for the “straight answer” to something, and Nikki replies, with obvious sarcasm, “straight?” Later, in episode 12 of the second season, Nikki says to Barbara, “I've had affairs with straight women before. They don't know what truth means, they're so used to manipulating men. Don't know why I thought she'd be any different.” The untrustworthiness of straight women, and the way they “experiment” and mess lesbians around, is a well-known narrative in lesbian communities.

Finally, in addition to its Cagney and Lacey style plot lines and anti-discrimination stories, BG's lesbian narrative is also tinged with more than a little feminism. This is significantly expressed in the show's treatment of homosexuality and, more specifically, in Helen's coming out story. In terms of the former, BG's lesbian perspective is a feminist one in the sense that, unlike other genres with gay characters, the causes or origins of inmates or officers' sexual orientation is never alluded to, much less discussed in any depth. Although we do learn about the background, and in some cases childhood, of lesbian inmates, their own coming out stories are never told, but simply assumed and taken for granted. Viewers are never given genetic or psychological explanations for characters' lesbianism. Marshment and Hallam (1994) have argued that this silence is in itself evidence of lesbian, and I would argue feminist, authorship. BG's highlighting of the implicit feminist politics of Helen and Nikki also stands in contrast to mainstream, apolitical representations of so-called “lesbian chic,” or the apolitical or even anti-political approach of *Ellen* (Hubert, 1999) or *Will and Grace* or even *Queer as Folk*.

When considering the way in which Helen comes out, BG's feminism becomes more apparent. Helen is initially drawn to Nikki's politics and interest in literature (*Sophie's World* is another novel that makes an appearance early in the first season). She then finds her relationship with Sean emotionally unsatisfying. By the end of the 2001 season, Helen appears to make a choice to come out – “I want a woman.” Although, as I suggested earlier, this statement can be read as a

challenge to essentialist identity claiming, BG's writers, who agonized over the line, intended it to reflect Helen's self-realization that she was, in fact, a lesbian. Indeed, the writers chose this particular phrasing as a way for Helen to acknowledge her authentic self (Chadwick & McManus, personal communication, 2001). In this sense, it is not the intention of the show to be queer; sexuality is not really fluid and "gender bending" and transgenderisms are entirely absent. BG's politics are rooted in an older lesbian feminism, one that celebrates women's solidarity and community, and this is most closely seen in its depiction of family.

In BG, nuclear families are either invisible or dysfunctional. There is a total absence of idealized family relations in the show, and this distinguishes it from other quasi-feminist dramas that retain at least one model, nuclear unit as the comparative norm (Byers, 1998; D'Acci, 1987). We know very little about most inmates' or officers' family backgrounds. The few times we encounter characters' parents they are either alcoholics, abusive, neglectful, or dismissed as uncaring and unsupportive. Nor does a single character in the series appear to have a satisfying relationship outside the prison. Instead, BG constructs an environment where relationships between women inside are paramount, and where the community of women inmates functions as a real family, providing the warmth, support, and, in some cases, mothering that the prisoners have not experienced on the outside. In more than one instance, inmates sacrifice relationships with men, and even with their own children, for each other. That this is a lesbian feminist construction of family is evidenced by the fact that lesbians are at the heart of this community – not outside it, opposed to it, or taking advantage of it.

The prison family BG constructs is also an interracial one, and one of the most intense and poignant friendships occurs between a black inmate and a white one. However, alongside this more progressive narrative, BG offers a vision of prison as a place where racism has been all but vanquished and where those who complain of it are over-reacting. An example of the latter is the following exchange between Crystal and Nikki in episode 7 of the first season, about Monica's appeal process:

Crystal (to Monica): You're lucky you're a white woman, girl. You only got five years and now you're gonna walk.
Nikki: Don't be daft Crystal.
Crystal: If she'd been black she'd have got life and that's a fact.

Crystal's final comment is patently ridiculous, as we know that Monica was convicted of fraud, and only serves to represent Crystal as "playing the race card" with no real justification. If, as the show's creators have stated, Nikki speaks for them as "the political heart and soul of the series" (Chadwick & McManus, 2001), and viewers see things very much through Nikki's eyes, then to have Nikki call Crystal's views daft is rather telling. This interaction between Nikki and Crystal also denies a bond they could have shared – the experience of oppression in the system – particularly given Nikki's allusions to having suffered anti-gay discrimination in her trial and sentencing (see also D'Acci, 1994).

Perhaps most unrealistically, racism is almost never perpetrated by any of the prison officers. The most racist character is a thoroughly unsympathetic prisoner (Renee Williams), who is poisoned and dies after appearing in

just two episodes. When Crystal complains about Renee's racism, the prison officers (even "bad" Jim Fenner) are appalled and take immediate action. This stands in contrast to Fenner's constant and threatening homophobia, and this juxtaposition helps to illustrate the extent to which BG's homonormativity is a white one. Strategies of Estrangement I discussed above the ways in which homophobia is expressed solely by the bad characters, and how this may render the remarks harmless and, perhaps, even amusing. The few instances where good characters are homophobic are used as educational devices. Crystal, for example, when she first enters the prison in episode 3 of the first season, tells Denny and Shell they will "burn in hell" for their unnatural activities. However, Crystal soon becomes friendly with Denny, and later with Nikki, and we never again hear her make such a remark. She learns, presumably, that homophobia is uncalled for and undeserving. Barbara, another sympathetic character, initially freaks out when forced to share a cell with Nikki. Within the same episode, however, Barbara regrets her reaction, realizes that her homophobia has helped to forge an unwanted alliance with a bad officer, and she and Nikki quickly become fast friends. When Nikki leaves the prison at the end of the third season, Barbara is heartbroken. The estrangement of homophobia is, therefore, an important element in securing the show's homonormativity.

Another significant move in BG, at least to some extent, is to represent heterosexuality as a largely unappealing problematic. Although the show's creators vehemently disagree with this interpretation, and Chadwick argues that BG "promotes loving relationships of all kinds" (Chadwick, email correspondence, 2001), I would argue that a large proportion of BG's representations of heterosexuality and bisexuality could be said to inhabit the violent, spectral place that Hart (1994) suggests is usually the province of lesbianism in popular culture. Or, as Marshment and Hallam (1994) have written in the context of the BBC's *Oranges* adaptation, BG could be said to:

... take for granted that which the dominant ideology would marginalize; investing the "deviant" relationships with all the highly valued qualities that "normal" relationships are supposed to possess, while denying them to those relationships that might technically be defined as "normal." It thus establishes within itself an oppositional commonsense (p. 151)

While one straight couple have an idealized romance that is not central to the first three seasons, no other heterosexual relationship is portrayed in a positive fashion. Jim Fenner's sexual relationships (with his wife and four other women) are embedded within scenes of violence, abuse and exploitation or, at best, deception and manipulation. Unlike the WIP genre where, Mayne (2000) has argued, male characters tend to be marginal to storylines, the centrality of the Jim Fenner character in BG plays a crucial role in "othering" heterosexuality.

Similarly, Sylvia (another bad officer) is depicted as having a sexually unsatisfying marital relationship, and she is represented as sexually repressed. We believe Yvonne and "her Charlie" to have a good relationship, until it becomes clear that she has ended up in prison due to his duplicitous adultery. Yvonne then betrays him in court and, following his acquittal, Yvonne's daughter has Charlie shot by a contract killer. Robin, Zandra's boyfriend, is shown to be an upper class,

weak-willed “bastard” who takes Zandra’s child away from her, leading to her attempting suicide. Other ostensibly straight inmates (Monica, the two Julies, Barbara) either have no relationships with men (Monica), or (in the case of one of the Julies) have a fleeting relationship they appear to give up for a woman friend, or they have killed men (in Barbara’s case, a mercy killing).

Heterosexuality is depicted as a site for out of control, dangerous, excessive behavior. This is most acutely drawn through the characters of Shell and Di Barker, an officer. Shell’s sexuality is described explicitly, by a visiting psychologist, as that of a “raving nymphomaniac,” and in episode 5 of the second season she begins a course of therapy to deal with this. Di Barker at times behaves like an obsessive stalker, who makes the lives of relatively good men miserable; her out of control desire even leads her to treat prisoners badly, which is not her normal mode of interaction. Early in the fourth season, Di falls for a psychopathic new officer who treats her with violent cruelty and contempt.

Bisexuality is similarly problematized and, to some extent, exists in what Cindy Patton has called an AIDS-era “in between ... netherworld” (1995, p. 21). To the extent that viewers, bringing their own readings to the text, interpret Shell’s character as bisexual (against authorial intention, see Chadwick & McManus, 2001), her bisexuality may appear as evidence of her general sexual dysfunction.⁴ The only other bisexual inmate we encounter is revealed to be a child pornographer. Helen’s bisexuality is represented as both problematic, and, in the end, an unviable life choice for this sympathetic, feminist crusader. Arguably, BG’s strategies of estrangement around hetero- and bisexualities are linked to its construction of a lesbian heroic that idealizes monogamy and fidelity.

Valorizations of monogamy are developed through several characters, including Nikki. Nikki shows no interest in Helen until Trish ends their relationship, and she shows no interest in anyone else until Helen does the same. Nikki over-embodies concepts of loyalty and fidelity, while BG invites viewers to criticize Helen’s inconstancy (until the end). Faith and virtue are also glorified in the show’s other idealized couple, Crystal and Josh. That they remain true to each other, despite severe obstacles and temptations, is one of BG’s repeated themes throughout the series. Denny and Shaz, another normalized couple within the parameters of the show’s discourse, also profess their exclusivity in episode 1 of the third season.

Shaz: Still fancy her, then?

Denny: Shell?

Shaz: Would you shag her if she came on to you?

Denny: Shell? What for? You’re my baby now, in’it?

Shaz: Ya, I am, Den. And you’re mine, right? So get back in bed then.

This is virtually the only sexualized scene between Denny and Shaz, and at least part of the point here must be to show that Denny has pledged herself to Shaz, and is no longer one of the promiscuous characters in the series. While exclusive coupledness is no doubt a realistic scenario in terms of real inmate relationships, BG’s celebration of monogamous couples is heightened by the show’s corresponding condemnation of infidelity and sexual excess.

In BG, adultery is the province of bad or weak men, Jim Fenner being the prime example. But there are other less obvious cases. Gina, an officer who joins the cast in the third season, suffers a miscarriage as a result of her partner Mark's infidelity with Di Barker. Yvonne's husband Charlie is killed as a result of his infidelity, as is his lover, Renee Williams, whom Yvonne poisons. Robin, Zandra's boyfriend, becomes a thoroughly dislikeable character after ditching Zandra for another woman. The two most morally bankrupt characters in the series, Shell and Jim, are also the most sexually promiscuous. In addition to his wife, Jim has sexual relationships with four other women, while Shell is involved with Denny and Jim, and tries it on with several other men. BG's good men are partly distinguished by their refusal to fall for Shell's charms. However, the show's feminist inflection is apparent in the fact that we are given an explanation for Shell's nymphomania – her childhood sexual abuse. At the same time, her sexuality is also explicitly medicalized (unlike the characters' lesbianism) and rendered abnormal within the terms of BG's sexual framework.

These ideas of fidelity and exclusive commitment are, however, embedded within the inmates non-sexual relationships. Crystal, for example, sacrifices her freedom and happiness with Josh in order to stay on the inside with Zandra, who is dying. The two Julies, whose deep friendship predates their incarceration, show their love for each other in a range of ways, including breaking into prison in order to be together. Importantly, this action, too, involves sacrificing (at least in the short term) a relationship with a man. However, at no time is a relationship with a woman sacrificed for one with a man.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have suggested a number of ways in which BG is both interesting and important. I have argued that BG is, in a sense, genre-less. This failure to conform to any particular genre facilitates its ability to convey non-dominant ideologies – in this case, a homonormativity that goes beyond the (re)production of positive images, or the conventional homosociality or “situational lesbianism” of the prison context. While arguing that the show is homonormative, I have tried to flesh out just what homonormativity might mean in this context, most particularly in terms of narrative, perspective, and strategies of familiarity and estrangement. I have also suggested the importance of understanding that even good lesbian representations may, at the same time, convey a set of other, more problematic ideologies. But BG also has broader significance beyond the content of its texts.

The main title of my paper is a direct quotation from a contributor to the (now defunct) message board on the official BG website. This young woman credits the series with allowing her to become “the real me,” and for bringing her new, “amazing friends.” Other contributors to the board, from many parts of the world, have consistently praised the show for encouraging their own self-development in a range of ways, including: making them feel safer to come out; allowing them to enter lesbian communities for the first time through the message board and through BG events; helping straight viewers think about homophobia for the first time, then helping them confront it in their workplace and elsewhere; and

encouraging reflections on sexuality more generally, in particular regarding how it might be possible to make new and different choices. There is no doubt that the show has had a positive impact on the lives of many real women (Millbank, 2002). That a popular, mainstream television series can bring visual pleasure to lesbian viewers, change the lives of individuals and, at the same time, “function as one of the sites through, and against which the meanings of feminism [and lesbianism] are produced and understood” (Moseley & Read, 2002, p. 235; see also Dow, 1996), are all important measures of BG’s broader significance.

Rosemary Hennessy (2000) however, alerts us to the dangers of “gay commodity fetishism” (see also Clark, 1991) as exemplified by concepts such as the gay market and the pink pound. She suggests that queer representation in popular culture is rarely worth celebrating because “money, not liberation, is the bottom line ... the increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences” (2000, p. 112). In keeping with these remarks, Alexandra Chasin (2000) has noted that Ellen’s coming out was consistently and inextricably linked to commodification and consumerism.⁵

If These Walls Could Talk 2, a one-off drama in three parts on lesbian lives made for HBO in 2000, also illustrates Hennessy’s (2000) concerns. Although the first two parts represent a lesbian past of discrimination and class ambiguity, the third, contemporary segment shows Ellen Degeneres and Sharon Stone as an extraordinarily affluent couple desperate to have a baby. Not only does this final segment promote a class-specific subjectivity, it is also ensconced firmly in an ever more popular zone of lesbian privatization, where having babies and getting married are all that matters. In contrast, BG focuses, with few exceptions, on the lives of working class women, many of whom come from backgrounds of extreme deprivation, and it embraces a feminist politics that is neither queer nor post.

BG’s challenge, for example to dominant gay market images, combined with its explicit feminist politics and narrative subversions, may be unsustainable under conditions of prevailing capitalist heteronormativity (Millbank, 2002). But it may be that such challenges become more frequent as new spaces emerge for cultural communication (Curtin, 1999). In the UK, the success of one independent, feminist television company, and its product, Bad Girls, may be one example of this space and possibility.

Notes

¹My analysis of BG is based on series 1–3, with a particular focus on series 1 and 2. Series 4, transmitted in spring 2002, takes rather different turns that I do not explore here.

²As is Oz, the American men’s prison drama also of interest for its gay representations. Both Queer as Folk and Oz are shown on cable in the late evening, while BG is shown at 9pm by the United Kingdom’s primary network channel.

³Thanks to Jenni Millbank for highlighting this point.

⁴Several fans on the BG message board were worried that “people out there” believed Shell to be a lesbian. The fans were concerned by this, particularly after a gruesome episode in series 3 where Shell and Denny set someone alight, accompanied by much kissing.

⁵Such representations also link into Christian Right constructions of the gay lifestyle. See Herman (1997).

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