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Writing characters with intersex variations for television

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, people with intersex variations have been positioned somewhere between ‘prodigy literature and pornography, mythology and medical discourse’ (Gilbert 2000: 145). Contemporary representations have changed in step with societal values, yet it could be argued there is still slippage towards sensationalism. This paper explores the writing of fictional characters with intersex variations for television. It is posited that screenwriters must go beyond limiting, stereotypical representations, and write characters with intersex variations ‘as an everyday social type’ (Pullen 2014: 273). Scripts which develop characters and narrative arcs in league with the intersex community rupture stigma, and pre-inscription, defy current medical interference and promote ethical debates.

KEYWORDS

Film &
television
Intersex
Screen studies
Cultural studies
Screenwriting
Representation
Character

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I shall be examining the writing of people with intersex variations for contemporary screen productions, focusing on fictional characters with intersex variations in narrative film and television genres – drama and comedy predominantly. An ‘intersex’ variation occurs in individuals where the reproductive organs are at variance with the genetic and /or hormonal sex. Nowadays, many intersex peer support groups and health care specialists also term an intersex variation as a Disorder of Sex Development or DSD, although the term has been fiercely disputed within the intersex community (Davis 2015, Groveman Morris 2006, Hughes et al. 2006: e488). Currently it is believed all humans start as ‘intersex’ in utero before typically developing towards male or female phenotypes (Ainsworth 2015). Depending on which variations are described as intersex or a disorder of sexual development, the incidence of intersex globally is a matter of much conjecture and controversy; some

scientists have suggested a frequency as high as between one or two in every 200 individuals (Blackless et al. 2000: 161, Fausto-Sterling 1993: 20, Sax 2002: 174).

My interest in how people with intersex variations are or could be portrayed in screenwriting is life long – I have an intersex variation and I have experienced first-hand the shame, stigma and secrecy of growing up different. My academic and creative interest really came to the fore when I became a television writer, producer and director, and made an autobiographical documentary about myself and my family. I called the film *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (Figure 1), and I am happy to report that that film went on to be screened and broadcast to audiences around the world, hopefully educating and inspiring many along the way (2010).

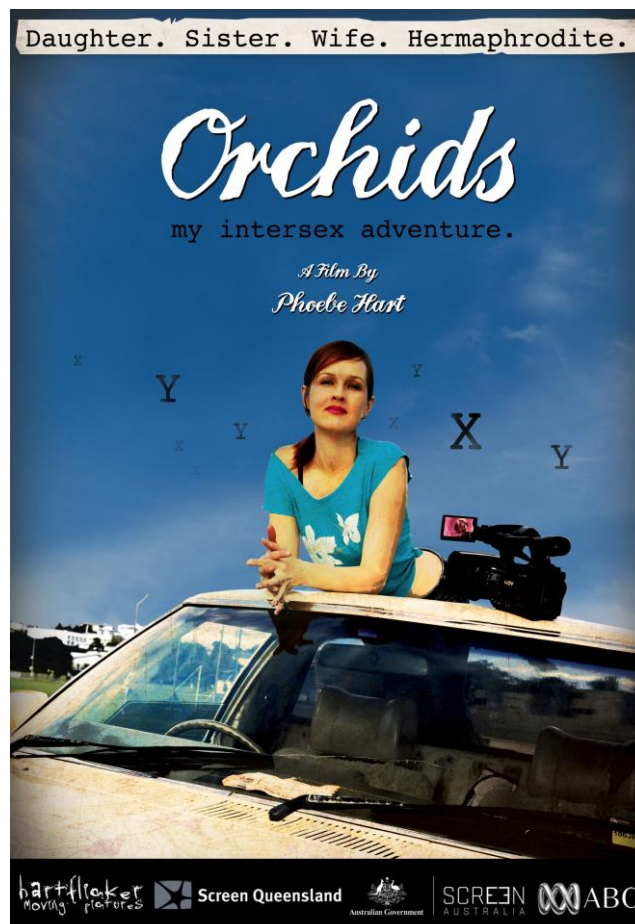


Figure 1: Movie poster for *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2010), Hartflicker Moving Pictures

Aside from my own small contribution, in the past ten to fifteen years, characters with an intersex variation have become the subject of many television programs. In part, this mirrors the rise in activism and awareness of intersex and its issues (Kessler 1998: 79). As a result of people coming together to form peer groups and organisations with the express purpose to support, educate and advocate, intersex activism has highlighted the inequities of current legal and medical frameworks that impact negatively upon people with intersex variations since the 1990s (Chase 2003: 31). This includes the non-consensual surgeries to gender assign intersexed infants and children, leading directly to widespread media and political attention of these emergent debates (Méndez 2013). Gradually, attitudes are beginning to change; yet stigma and its subsequent traumas are still perceived by the intersex community as critical issues (Chase et al. 2002, Davis 2015, Diamond 2004: 626-9, Jones et al. 2015).

REPRESENTING INTERSEX

Since the early modern era, people with intersex variations appearing in any kind of public performance or portrayal in the Western World were usually positioned somewhere between ‘prodigy literature and pornography, mythology and medical discourse’ (Gilbert 2000: 145). Indubitably, contemporary depictions have changed as our values and ethical standards have changed. While some may argue that the representations of yesteryear have been replaced by “politically correct” versions, there is still often slippage toward antiquated and exploitative portrayals of people with unusual bodies in mainstream film and television (Norden 2001: 23). Even still, mediatized characters that openly display sexual or gendered difference often perish or are punished ‘in service of returning the narrative to the normal world’ (Clum in Pullen 2014: 274). Moreover, it could be argued that comparatively very little is seen or heard about the hermaphrodite at all; where once there was the ‘awe and horror’ of the highly visible carnival sideshow or medical treatise, the hermaphroditic body is now rendered absent by medical intervention and erasure (Grosz 1996: 60-61).

Contemporary characters with intersex variations in the media run the gamut of engaging, well-rounded characters such as Cal Stephanides in the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Middlesex* (Eugenides 2002) to individuals as objects of ridicule. For instance, in an episode of the long-running NBC ‘sitcom’ series *Friends* (1994-2004)

entitled *The One With the Rumor* (2001), Jennifer Anniston's hetero-normative character 'Rachel' is rumoured (as a cruel joke) to be a hermaphrodite at high school, insinuating that while her parents 'flipped a coin' to decide to raise her as a girl, she 'still had the hint of a penis' (Halvorson). The episode when aired in the USA generated indignant outcries from the intersex community, due to the program-makers' lack of understanding and sympathy, and their sensationalistic approach (Chase 2001).

By contrast, not so many years later we have the feature-length irreverent teen musical *Spork* (2010), centring on the eponymous character (whose nickname is unkindly coined by classmates, as she is 'both fork and spoon'), and the coming-of-age Argentinean film *XXY* (2007). The latter was a winner of a prestigious Jury award at the Cannes Film Festival (2008) and centres on an intersexed teenager ('Alex' played by Inés Efron) being pressured by his/her family to choose a gender. At the same time, Alex begins to explore his/her emergent sexuality and desire (Mayer 2008: 15).

It could be argued that the increasing visibility of people with intersex variations in modern screen-based media – particularly in fictionalised narratives – is indicative of an acceptance of various subjectivities, and of even a post-modern celebration of erotic ambiguity and gender play (Gilbert 2000: 155). While becoming more tolerable, and in some cases even fashionable, the portrayal of non-heterosexual or androgynous characters tends to rely on 'tried and tested' narrative devices. In particular, visual storytelling relies on the creation and recognition of stereotypes (Finkelstein 2007: 7). Previous research of homosexual characters in popular television demonstrates how characters written for the small screen 'model, reinforce and validate' certain typecasts (Fouts and Inch 2005: 42). Therefore it is perhaps safe to say that the intersex stereotype has become identifiable in popular culture, albeit often an unappealing portrayal. As Halberstam notes, many films use revulsion, sympathy, or empathy in order to grant hetero-normative audiences admission (2005: 77). Other commentators argue that identification with a character with an intersex variation may traditionally only be achieved via 'the perverse pleasure of voyeurism... counterbalanced by horror' (Grosz 1996: 64).

The writing of sensational and unsubtle intersex characters and narrative arcs are arguably the by-product of the cultural-industrial mechanisms of television production. Aside from tight financial and time constraints, groups of writers working on television series (the “writers’ room”) are subject to interpersonal dynamics and ‘complex control over decision making’ (Macdonald 2013: 73). Even writing groups with a diverse membership often develop characters of gender, race, class, and cultural difference that ‘mimic the dominant group because there is little acceptance of actual difference’ (Henderson 2011: 152). Under such circumstances it may therefore be understandable, if inexcusable, that the portrayal of characters with intersex variations on television series often lacks insight and sensitivity. To make plain any deficiency, I will examine the gamut of intersex characters already written for the small screen and argue that screenwriters must go beyond stereotypical representations, and write characters with intersex variations ‘as an everyday social type’ (Pullen 2014: 273).

MEDICAL MYSTERIES

Many medical drama series over the past decade or more have included characters with intersex variations. On occasion, writers on these series have attempted to portray the existence of people with intersex variations in a sympathetic light, highlighting issues concurrent with the health and psycho-social concerns of the intersex community in general. Indeed medical diagnosis has and continues to impact intersex lives significantly, and is part of our struggles and stories (Davis 2015). In an episode of the Australian medical drama series *All Saints* (Seven Network 1998-2009) entitled *Truth Hurts* (2006) it is discovered by doctors (the lead characters of the series) that the patient has an intersex variation, Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), a variation whereby individuals are phenotypically female yet have male sex chromosomes and gonads. Drama ensues. While the episode presents an aspect of actuality, the script fails to adhere to many aspects of the widely held aims of intersex identity and activism. For *Truth Hurts*, this failure arises as it is often doctors who encourage and foster non-disclosure of the intersex variation to their patients. In effect, *Truth Hurts* puts the onus of ‘telling’ children and adolescents with intersex variations about their status on the shoulders of parents – a softer more politically-fractured target – making this programme, arguably, less politically damaging versioning of the truth. The script plays out stereotypes which are rapidly becoming

associated with intersex characters, such as the stereotype of the AIS women as ‘superwomen’. This stereotype comes out of certain “urban legends” in the media and online, stating that many ‘perfect’ women – namely beautiful actors and models – are actually men unable to respond to testosterone due to their genetic condition (Wampler 2010). Furthermore, the screenplay describes the variation as a ‘genetic glitch’, emphasising the need to have a ‘freak-ectomy’ to fix up the problem.

American medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC 2005-present)) offers the possibility of accepting the horror of a child with an intersex variation as he or she is, without having to ‘fix the problem’, and demonstrates the mainstream media’s grappling with the emergent visibility of intersex. In a few scenes of the episode (*Begin the Begin* (Yu 2006), doctors debate with distressed parents on the appropriate standard of medical care, arguing that children with intersex variations have a right to know ‘biologically and emotionally speaking’ about proposed normalizing surgery. However, the program also misses the mark at several junctures. ‘Bex’ (the teenaged intersex character played by Becca Gardner) has an intersex variation but it is never clearly defined. However, *Begin the Begin* under-explores the issues of gender identity and intersex, as a distinct lack of clarity and correct information, even from a biological point of view, means little has been done to help audiences understand what intersex is or how it actually works. Nevertheless, the writers have attempted to highlight the most sensational aspects of the controversy of non-disclosure and surgery surrounding intersex. It could also be said that the conventions of melodrama narrative, and the overriding narrative concern of promoting the relationships between the lead characters, mean that there is simply not enough time to cover all the issues raised by the patients appropriately. Yet screenwriters and producers ought to give more attention to the informative aspects within such programming. It is worth mentioning that the second series of *Grey’s Anatomy* (in which *Begin the Begin* appeared) was the fifth most watched series in the United States, garnering an average audience of 21.3 million per episode (Mika 2006).

Other screen representations of people with intersex variations are more controversial. In an episode of the American medical dramedy series *House* (Fox 2004-2012) entitled *Skin Deep*(2006), again a special patient (‘Alex’ played by Cameron Richardson) has presented herself to the disabled doctor and chief protagonist

‘Gregory House’ as a supermodel with enigmatic medical symptoms, including angry, unfeminine outbursts. It also becomes apparent that she has had an incestuous relationship with her own father (‘Austin’). When House discovers that Alex has Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, an intersex variation which typically result in individuals presenting as feminine in its complete form, and in fact is suffering from a cancerous inguinal teste, House’s disclosure is (perhaps typically for his character) aimed to shock:

HOUSE

... See we all start out as girls and then we're differentiated because of our genes. The ovaries develop into testes and they drop. But in one in every 150,000 pregnancies a child with an XY chromosome, a boy, develops into something else, like you. Your testes never descended because you're immune to testosterone. You're pure estrogen, which is why you get heightened female characteristics: clear skin, great breasts. The ultimate woman is a man. Nature's cruel, huh?

AUSTIN

This is obviously a joke. This is impossible.

HOUSE

No, a joke would be me calling you a homo. See the difference? I'll schedule him for surgery.

Alex gets out of bed.

ALEX

(Shouting)

No you're wrong, I'm a girl.

Alex throws off her gown and stands naked before House, while other staff and patients pass by in the hall.

ALEX

Look at me! How can you say I'm not a girl? See they're all looking at me. I'm beautiful!

HOUSE

The anger is just the cancer talking. Put your clothes back on. We'll cut your balls off and you'll be fine.

HOUSE turns and leaves the room. ALEX falls back on the bed crying.

Perhaps, rather than the ‘cancer talking’, Alex’s anger is the result of an infuriating encounter with the medical fraternity. Aside from the medical inaccuracies of the script itself (wildly under-estimating the frequency of the variation), the narrative

suggests that the intersexed woman has no claim to femininity due solely to her chromosomes and gonads. The intersex stereotype re-emerges, the one of the AIS woman as the ‘ultimate woman’ being ‘a man’. At the initial broadcast of the episode in the United States there was a strong response from the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), a peak body at the time for intersex support and advocacy, which considered the episode ‘so flawed’ and ‘one of the most offensive and hurtful portrayals of people with intersex conditions’ (Herndon 2006). Tony Briffa, former President of the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (Australia) described the episode more succinctly in a personal interview on 13 June, 2008, as ‘total garbage’.

For screenwriters crafting queer characters, ‘the recognition of history, and the contexts of abject positioning... remain central contexts of engagement’ (Pullen 2014: 285). The ‘based on fact’ medical drama series *Masters of Sex* (2013-present) has screened on Showtime in the US, and is set in the 1950s and 1960s – a time when the medical community was turning its scalpel toward ambiguously gendered bodies (Harper 2007, Lorber 1998) although now these procedures have been widely accepted to be much more damaging than healing (Diamond and Sigmundson 1997). In the episode entitled *Fight* (Episode 3, Season 2), the program-makers attempt to examine this obscure moment of medical history with a revisionist lens.

The show’s protagonist, Dr Bill Masters (played by Michael Sheen) – a groundbreaking researcher of human sexuality, and a gynaecologist – attends the birth of an intersex new-born (Apted 2014). Dr Masters argues that the child should be left untouched, but when the baby is surgically assigned a male gender by another doctor at the parents’ insistence, Masters is left to ponder the intransigence of therapeutic doctrine and the nature of masculinity. Whether the scene is purely fictional or approximates Bill Masters’ view this piece reprises the stereotype of innocent and passive victim, and again places the onus on the shoulders of parents, the passionate defence of the child by one of the medical fraternity’s own raises doubt over practices that have since become institutionalised medical paradigm.

FREAKY FABLES

Concurrent to the aforementioned assortment of intersex characters appearing in on-going medical dramas for the small screen, subversive fictional treatments of intersex from marginal, less mainstream writers have also emerged. In part, this may have something to do with the rapid proliferation of first-person documentaries in the mass media in the late part of the twentieth century, including docusoaps, video diaries and a myriad of reality television formulas: a multiplicity of private voices moving over into the public realm. This has been a cultural phenomenon that has heartened individuals from the margins to step centre stage into the limelight, ‘proclaiming and celebrating their own “freakishness”, articulating their most intimate fears and secrets, performing the ordinariness of their own extraordinary subjectivity’ (Dovey 2000: 4). As “reality” informs fantasy, so we encounter a new slate of screen representations of people with intersex variations.

While the semi-autobiographical situational comedy series *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) only enjoyed a limited run on NBC in the United States, it garnered subsequent cult status for its subversive treatment of teenage coming-of-age issues, and celebration of the collective high school identification of ‘nerds’ and ‘stoners’. The series centres on the lives of the unpopular students at McKinley High School in the early 1980s. In the episode entitled *The Little Things* (2000), the plot deals with the blossoming romantic relationship between band geek ‘Amy Andrews’ (AKA ‘Tuba Girl’ played by Jessica Campbell) and loud-mouthed “freak” ‘Ken Miller’ (played by Seth Rogan). Amy confesses to Ken that her parents had to choose whether to make her a girl or boy though she clearly identifies as a girl, which causes Ken to question his own sexuality.

Rumour has it that Judd Apatow – the series creator – initially suggested that they should write Ken’s love interest as having a penis as a joke before deciding to portray Amy’s difference more sensitively (Powell 2006). Ken wrestles with the fact that he might be gay because he is dating someone who is ‘part boy’; and at this moment, gives an authentic awareness into the dilemma such disclosure could invoke in a heterosexual male, even if part of that dilemma is to test one’s ‘gayness’ by listening to David Bowie records (as Ken does). Amy’s story is backgrounded; Amy’s ‘coming out’ is used as a narrative device in order to precipitate an existential crisis in

Ken. Her disclosure is somewhat ominous, as she says that she had the ‘potential to be male or female’ at birth without any further explanation, and that she is glad her parents chose for her to be a girl.

Despite this, Campbell’s portrayal of Amy is nuanced, recreating a believable hesitancy when telling Ken about her status, and then at once nervous and upset by Ken’s withdrawal post-disclosure. Her script and performance demonstrate an attempt on the part of the writer to recreate a ‘real’ intersex disclosure narrative.

Amy and Ken are cuddling on the bed, clothes on.

AMY

You know, I think it’s important that we tell each other everything. Don’t you?

KEN

Yeah. ‘Course.

Amy sits up to look directly at Ken.

AMY

I want to tell you something about myself. It’s really important so I want you to promise me you won’t freak out.

Ken sits up too, suddenly curious.

KEN

Oh, I’m pretty hard to freak out.

AMY

I’m serious. You promise?

KEN

I can try to promise. If you killed someone or something though –

AMY

No. Forget it.

KEN

Sorry.

AMY

(Beat)

This isn’t really that uncommon. But when I was born I had the potential to be male or female.

KEN

Yeah. Me too.

AMY

No. I mean I was born with both. Both male and female parts.

KEN

(confused)

Uh huh.

AMY

My parents made a decision with the doctors that I should be a girl. I mean, thank god because that's who I am but it's still a really big part of my life. And I thought you should know.

KEN

No this is good that you told me... this.

AMY

Are you freaking out?

KEN

(shakes head woodenly)

No. You're all girl now.

AMY

Yeah.

KEN

Yeah! So it's OK. Y'know?

(slapping Amy on her knee)

If I was dating you when you were just born then things might have been a little different. But now you're all girl now so it's... OK.

AMY

Thanks Ken.

KEN

Yeah! I had my appendix out. So you know. I've been there.

Amy bursts out laughing. Ken doesn't know where to look.

Of course, in the context of the series, Amy's freakishness is celebrated. However, her intersex variation has been presented in the format of a love story in order to access a mainstream audience, and it is left to the normatively gendered Ken to decide whether or not their relationship should continue. The episode concludes with Ken coming to terms with Amy's difference and his own feelings that Amy's revelation

has induced. Ken makes amends with Amy before she goes off to play the tuba. Although it presents a somewhat unbalanced representation of intersex, *The Little Things* offers an alternative, even liberating outcome .

The fourth series of the darkly comedic and decidedly camp anthology *American Horror Story* (FX 2011-present), entitled “Freak Show”, inhabits the arena of a 1950s small town in Florida USA, just at the point that a travelling troupe of freaks and a supernatural presence arrive. Clearly, the season pays homage to the 1932 Hollywood classic on the world of the carnival sideshow entitled *Freaks* (Browning 1932) but such public spectacles, which often included individuals with intersex variations, remained a popular form of entertainment throughout the century as ‘a monstrous demonstration of divine judgment’, resulting in ‘a particular curiosity which has arguably characterized representations of intersexuality up until the present day’ (Gilbert 2000: 155). In the second episode of the season (*Massacres and Matinees* 2014), we are introduced to the brazen three-breasted ‘Desiree Dupree’ (Angela Bassett) and her new husband, strongman ‘Del Toledo’ (Michael Chiklis) (Gomez-Rejon 2014). Espousing ‘proper girl parts, and a ding-a-ling’, Desiree proudly claims her status as a ‘full-blown hermaphrodite’ in order to gain entry to ‘Fraulein Elsa Mars’ (Jessica Lange) Cabinet of Curiosities. In the context of the period setting, the use of the word ‘hermaphrodite’ may plausibly not be as pejorative a term as it is today. As the season progresses, it is discovered that Dupree’s penis is in fact an enlarged clitoris, and the character is faced with a decision whether to proceed with surgery to reduce its size.

Whereas as Alex represents a surplus of femaleness, Desiree is complete monstrosity, made all the more so thanks to the imbroglio of her race, sexuality, sex and gender and a mash of concurrent stereotypes around black women and their sexualities (Hammonds 1999: 93). Despite the fact intersex variations in humans do not extend to having a complete set of both male and female reproductive organs, Dupree’s physiological incorrectness seems moot in relation to this work; after all, Bassett played Marie Laveau, a baby-stealing Voodoo Queen who invokes minotaurs and brings the dead back to life in the previous iteration of the series, “Coven”. This is *American Horror Story*, and, as such, ‘nothing is off limits’ (Schremph 2014). That

Dupree unashamedly and lustily takes ownership of her difference and sexuality ('I'm a lady, and then some' (Deutch 2014)) rather than portray the victim is heartening. Interestingly, the program playfully prods at hierarchies of normalcy, whereby hetero-normative imperatives of sex, desire and gender are maintained by the psychological placement of self against "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined' (Butler 1990: 17). As such, the freaks vie for position with the "normals" of the town, ultimately gaining their respect, and on occasion dryly put other non-normals in their place (Dupree asserts 'poofs' are 'lower than us freaks'). While there is a risk the non-normalcy illustrated in *Freak Show* (2014) serves as purely fetishistic titillation, such satire may also call the assumptions of hetero-normative viewers to account. In a stirring monologue by the central protagonist, Elsa Mars, the battlelines are clearly drawn (Murphy 2014):

ELSA MARS

I'll tell you who the monsters are! The people outside this tent! In your town, in all these little towns. Housewives pinched with bitterness, stupefied with boredom as they doze off in front of their laundry detergent commercials, and dream of strange, erotic pleasures. They have no souls. My monsters, the ones you call depraved, they are the beautiful, heroic ones. They offer their oddity to the world. They provide a laugh, or a fright, to people in need of entertainment. Everyone is living the life they chose. But you, you undoubtedly will be one of those soulless monsters. Perhaps you already are.

WORKING WITH/IN THE INTERSEX COMMUNITY

Some screenwriters are becoming more willing to work with people with intersex variations when crafting intersex characters for the screen, particularly in programming aimed at youth audiences. In the first episode of the second series of MTV's comedic high school drama *Faking It* (2014-present) entitled *The Morning Aftermath* (2015), one of the main characters, the somewhat conservative yet confrontational 'Lauren Cooper', somewhat reluctantly "outs" herself as intersex

(Scanlon 2014). Laudably, the program set in the suburbs of Austin, Texas had already developed a number of lesbian and gay characters for the first season of the series, although for much of that season Lauren appears proudly homophobic: she tells on-again off-again girlfriends ‘Amy’ (Lauren’s step sister) and ‘Karma’ they have ‘five seconds to hop in your canoe and go back to the Isle of Lesbos’ (Travis 2014). Lauren’s character develops considerably upon her disclosure as intersex, and she becomes more vulnerable. Her intersex character arc is explored across multiple episodes of the second series when at first she shares her secret with only her close friends.

LAUREN

I have a medical condition called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome and the side effects include great hair, smooth skin and no body odor.

LISBETH

Cool. Can we get it too?

LAUREN

(beat)

It’s not something you can get. I was born with XY chromosomes but I developed as a female, OK? The pills I take are estrogen because my body doesn’t make any. There. Now you know.

LEILA

Can you have kids?

Lauren shakes her head and Lisbeth and Leila lean in to give Lauren a big hug.

LISBETH

(while hugging)

If it makes you feel any better, I have eczema.

LAUREN

This is not group sharing Lisbeth!

For Lauren’s intersex story, the writers and producers worked closely with consultants from InterAct, a group for young people with intersex variations or DSD committed to sharing their stories with the world (Inter/Act 2014). On the collaboration, *Faking It* showrunner Carter Covington said:

Part of the overall theme of *Faking It* is how hard it is to be your authentic self and how important it is to strive to do that. At the beginning of last season, we were discussing in the writers room what that could be and we stumbled on, “What if she were born intersex?” We all had the reaction that the other characters had on show: “What exactly is that?” We felt like it was a no brainer because it really frames who Lauren is and why she has walls up, why she is hyper-feminine and why she is who she is. It's a story I've never heard told before, and our show is all about showing the diversity of experiences that young people are faced with today (Goldberg 2014).

A task of screenwriters is to find ‘a path of revelation, about our characters gaining deeper psychological insight, such as an epiphany into who they really are, or who they become’ (Lee 2013: 67). Although Lauren’s story (or something like it) may have been told in various broadcast documentaries (such as my own), the writers active engagement with the community has produced a facsimile of the real-life drama which plays out for many young people with an intersex variation. As the series progresses, Lauren develops a relationship with classmate ‘Theo’, negotiating her difference with courage and overcoming barriers to reach her goal of acceptance and to forge an intimate connection. This somewhat everyday character motivation has greater emphasis for young people with intersex variations, who suffer the pain, shame, and secrecy of infertility and gender-assigning genital surgery (Koyama and Weasel 2002: 169-70). In social, medical and representational situations, bodies with intersex are routinely ‘stripped of their ability to pleasure and be pleased’ by medicalisation and social erasure; as such, Lauren’s arc ruptures ‘asexual pre-inscription’ (Colligan 2004: 50).

The *Faking It* writing team have highlighted the challenges of young people whose sexuality and gender does not fit the mainstream yet have a right to love and be loved. Rather than retreating to homophobic ‘knee jerk’ reactions the writers place intersex characters in non-shaming, non-stigmatising, non-objectifying social and romantic situations – empathetically positioning Lauren as ‘an everyday social type’ (Pullen 2014: 273). Even here, characters with an intersex variation can only mostly explain their difference to others in terms of medical pathology. Many in the intersex community do not wish to promote terminology that perpetuates the view that their

bodies as disorder, although, admittedly, it is nearly impossible not to do so (Reis 2007: 540). In the case of both *Freaks and Geeks* and *Faking It* the admission by the character with an intersex variation they have a ‘medical condition’ is received and reflected by well-meaning but unaware normative characters respectively referring to their own more common and less stigmatising brushes with medicine in the forms of appendicitis and eczema, presumably for comedic effect. There are also hints of ‘the ultimate woman’ intersex typecast in both examples, yet both Amy and Lauren are empowered and control their own narrative and “coming out”. Such a revelation opens a space for a ‘pure relationship’ between the writer, the character and the viewer(s) based upon trust and shared experience (Giddens 1991: 6). As a consequence, the intersex community has received the show’s depiction enthusiastically (InterAct 2014).

CONCLUSION

Halberstam notes that the writing of gendered identities for the screen has shifted from simply being a ‘tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard’ (read: *House*) to texts that attempt to revise concepts such as ‘heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment’ (2005: 96). Judith Butler reiterates the value of creating works and acts ‘that challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs’ (cited in Butler 1996). Works such as these rupture stigma, and pre-inscription, defy current medical interference and promote ethical debates around the ‘will-to-normalize’ what is considered to be aberrant, deviant and abject (Garland Thomson 2005: 264) in favour of awareness, acceptance and closure.

As I have demonstrated, while there is slippage towards retrograde representations, screenwriters and producers are also reaching out and working with members of the intersex community. The result is characters and narrative arcs which attempt to validate the struggles, histories and aims of people with intersex variations, and which are owned by and satisfactory to both intersex and normatively gendered audiences. For writers unfamiliar with the terrain of intersex, a willingness to collaborate and a certain openness and self-awareness is required. Pullen encourages screenwriters to

‘explore your environment and to find a pathway for potential audience engagement’ as a screenwriter’s personal processes, experiences, convictions and attitudes infuse the script and are readable by audiences (2014: 284). There are rewards for those who take the time to research and engage with people with intersex variations, as audiences want to learn more about the human condition, especially via courageous characters at the limit of self, placed in the ‘most severe situations’ (Lee 2013: 84).

Beyond any biological difference, intersex is a socially constructed phenomenon (Davis 2015).

Positioning people with intersex variations as “‘Other”, immoral, and odd’ results in a person feeling unaccepted and unacceptable (Preves 2003: 20). While the media often contributes to the notion of intersex as extraordinary and atypical, there is the possibility that future writing of characters with intersex variations and their narrative arcs for television will represent us as natural and normal – the ‘everyday social type’ although not without our challenges. As Plummer notes:

The stories we tell of our lives are deeply implicated in moral and political change and the shifting tales of self and identity carry potential for radical transformation of the social order. Stories work their way into changing lives, communities and cultures (2003: 38).

This is especially relevant and helpful for young people with intersex variations. In the end, the result of such an undertaking transformative, even therapeutic, leading to a greater awareness and understanding of intersex variations in contemporary society.

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