

Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies

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During the “Reflective Casting: Trends or Content? Presented by Casting Society of America” panel discussion at the 2015 ATX TV Festival in Austin, I asked the panelists, who included casting directors Tracy Lilienfield, Tracy “Twinkie” Byrd and Jennifer Euston, about casting heterosexual actors in gay roles. In particular, I inquired about the ways casting functions as a culture industries discourse vis-à-vis the politics of gay representation. Lilienfield responded, “On *Grace & Frankie* we never had one single conversation about whether anyone playing Robert or Saul [the series’ two gay characters] was actually gay. We just wanted the best actor.” Her response is bound up in both post-gay rhetoric and industrial discourses related to casting processes for gay male characters. Post-gay rhetoric suggests that gayness, as an identity, has ceased to have any cultural specificity. With respect to casting as a component of American entertainment culture, post-gayness intersects with casting decisions and allows casting directors (and showrunners) to, as Lilienfield suggests, look for the best actor – not the best *gay* actor. In looking for only the best actor, and simultaneously subscribing to post-gay rhetoric, casting directors function as gatekeepers who can literally keep gay actors from getting work. While casting directors like Lilienfield suggest that they do not care whether or not the actor chosen to play a gay character identifies as such in real life, the result is that heterosexual actors often get cast in gay roles, and their labor with respect to donning gayface is heralded in a way infrequently afforded gay actors, on the occasion that such actors get to play gay roles. While it cannot be denied that some gay actors are, in fact, getting work on television, the overwhelming degree to which heterosexual actors are cast in gay roles while gay actors are often passed over

for such roles as well as understood as being “too gay” for heterosexual roles cannot be dismissed.

What can be gained by studying casting with respect to gay roles in Hollywood? Such study can uncover the ways heterosexism permeates both the casting process as well as the ways heterosexual actors taking on such roles position themselves within the industry broadly and among their publics specifically. While heterosexual actors continue to be cast in gay roles, their star texts endeavor to separate the role they play on television from the role they play in “real life.” Additionally, there is a discursive investment with and in the actor’s performance of gayness as queer labor. Because they don gayface to play gay roles while embodying a possessive investment in their heterosexuality within their star texts, they uphold their “gay for play” status in paratexts, but include co-stars and talk show hosts to validate the paratextual heterosexuality while highlighting and praising their queer labor – a labor that is both effective and affective because of their heterosexuality. In a world where the assumption is that being gay (and coming-out) has become inconsequential in both the “real world” and within Hollywood, examining casting illuminates the ways doing so can place actors in a double bind. As an out, gay actor told me, gayness is still precariousness with respect to Hollywood casting. He said:

Right now I’m still doing my best to not make any public statements about my sexuality. Because we live in a country where [Donald] Trump is the leading presidential candidate for the Republican Party, I’m trying to stay away from “gay actor thinks...” kinds of pieces. At least until I can establish myself enough to where I don’t care about any adverse effects, like type casting... I’m just trying to get access to all the limited access they give me.” (Personal communication, January 10, 2016).

As we continue to imagine “positive” representations to be bound up in marriage and heteronormative masculinity in televisual representation, we limit the scripts within which homosexuality can be imagined. Popular series like *Modern Family* and *Scandal* contribute to the continued reification of these homonormative scripts by, on one hand, casting heterosexual actors in gay roles and, on the other, allowing actors to separate the heterosexual actor from the gay role he plays. The show’s creator, casting directors, and actors further reify the circuit of power; reinforcing the ways we should understand “good” homosexuality both textually, intertextually and paratextually. By casting heterosexual actors in particular ways and allowing GLAAD to police the borders and boundaries of “positive” representation, series continue to reify the industrial capital of heterosexual actors’ queer labor. Ultimately, the circuitous nature of casting and the celebrity daytime talk show conspire to reify a particular image of televisual gayness in American network television, while ensuring that heterosexual actors continue to work in gay roles, while gay actors often remain woefully unemployed.