



The Personal is Professional on TV

I'll Be There For You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families

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As I finish writing this article, the fourth season of *Friends*, a weekly sitcom about a group of single, white, middle-class, twenty-somethings living in New York City, is about to come to a close. The season finale (set to air after this goes to press) is expected to feature the wedding of one of the show's central characters Ross (played by David Schwimmer), to his English girlfriend Emily. Given the history of sit-coms in general, and of this show in particular, it seems highly likely the wedding will not take place, but will instead—at the eleventh hour and amid chaotic slapstick, irony, and sentimentality—be called off by a declaration of true love from his former girlfriend, Rachel (played by Jennifer Aniston). Previews suggest that Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow)—unable to attend the London wedding because she is pregnant as a surrogate mother with her brother and sister-in-law's triplets—will do her best to prevent Rachel from making a fool of herself, while Monica (Courtney Cox), Chandler (Matthew Perry), and Joey (Matt LeBlanc) will stand by as the true friends that they are.

Even if you have never seen an episode of *Friends*, and have no idea who these characters are, you could probably picture the scene. *Friends* is nothing if not derivative of other television shows, and the trope of the “season finale wedding”—together with last-minute declarations of love, and friends to help or hinder the romance(s)—is generic. Of course I may be wrong. The wedding may in fact take place, and all will be well. What will be noteworthy if the wedding

does happen, however, is that this will signal a shift in the ongoing narrative of the show. While *Friends* is part of a new tradition of television shows about groups of young people sharing their lives together, the program is also remarkable for its unconventional portrayal of family and domestic life. This is not a show which champions normative heterosexuality: Ross, the groom-to-be, is divorced, while his ex-wife Carol lives with their son Ben and her lesbian partner Susan; Rachel almost got married in the pilot, with that episode revolving around her arrival in her wedding dress at the “Central Perk” café after leaving her fiancé at the altar. The pilot ends with the almost-bride-to-be wistfully watching Joanie and Chachi’s marriage on “Happy Days,” signaling the kind of ironic pop culture references which have come to define the show. Phoebe, who is single and whose father is dead and whose mother abandoned her, is currently bearing three babies for her long-lost brother and his wife. And Chandler’s parents are divorced, with his father now working in the first all-male gay burlesque “Viva Las Gaygas” show in Las Vegas. The imminent wedding is unusual, therefore, since *Friends* has, up until now, focused obsessively on the failures, rather than the advantages, of heterosexual coupling. Dwelling instead on the trials and tribulations of families in the 1990s, the promise of the show is that in the face of heterosexual failure and familial dysfunction, all you need are good friends.

MUST SEE TV

Since premiering in September 1994, *Friends* has maintained consistently high ratings and the show is one of the major shows in NBC’s “Must See TV” Thursday night line-up. The theme tune “I’ll Be There For You” was a hit single for The Rembrandts, and the show and its actors have earned many nominations and awards, including a People’s Choice Award from The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) for its depiction of a lesbian couple. While the six main actors in the show were more or less all unknown when first hired for *Friends*, and earned about \$22,500 an episode, the show’s subsequent success (in 1996 Warner Bros. sold the show into syndication for \$4 million an episode) led them to demand, and get, a (then) record \$100,000 each per episode plus a percentage of the series profits (Masters, 1996).¹ The show has spawned a cottage industry of texts which surround the show: countless articles in the popular media and press, fan books, clothing, and a vast number of Internet newsgroups, homepages, and web-sites devoted to the show, the actors, and the fans.² One of the characters’ haircuts became a popular fad (“the Rachel”), and all of the actors regularly grace the covers of various popular teenage and adult magazines. *Friends* is not only popular in the United States but also is shown around the world (as is evidenced by the nationalities of participants in Internet discussions), and tapes of the program recently went on sale in the United Kingdom, where it plays weekly to an audience of 5 million (Peter, 1997). In 1996, during its third season, *Friends* scored the prestigious post-Superbowl slot, and the actors famously endorsed Diet Coke in a related ad, earning somewhere

between \$250,000 and \$500,000 each. The ad featured the six actors speaking lines scripted by the show's own writers, confusing the distinction between advertisement, product placement, and show (Marin, 1996). While the *Friends*/Diet Coke ad was unusual for blurring these distinctions so blatantly, it merely foregrounded what has been true of United States sitcoms since at least *I Love Lucy*—that the actors are not only characters in a show, but that they also endorse consumer products and ways of life. By almost any measure of commercial and popular success, therefore, *Friends* is more than simply a television show but is also firmly situated within American popular imaginary as an icon of its time.

Friends has also garnered some critical acclaim. British film critic Andy Medhurst (1996), for example, praised the show for being “the wittiest, most humane American comedy of the decade” (18). Arguing that *Friends* simultaneously pays homage to and rewrites classic sitcoms of the past, Medhurst suggests that the show's success lies in the way it so “expertly captures and so skillfully romanticizes its particular slice of time” (18). But what is this “slice of time” that *Friends* both memorializes and reinvents? As a show about single young men and women in an urban setting, it is part of a larger trend of shows about groups of friends who live together or as neighbors, and who provide the “haven in a heartless world” that the family often fails to deliver.³ But it is not only, or simply, a celebration of friendships. Instead, the show depicts a “family” full of anxieties about what it means to create a kinship network from friends and neighbors. Even though the show foregrounds and celebrates kinship networks which challenge the mythical nuclear heterosexual family, for example, the visibility of these “alternative families” is made possible only by simultaneously rendering invisible other kinds of “difference.” While spokespeople for *Friends* argue that it “just happens” to be about a group of white people,⁴ I want to suggest that the whiteness of this family of friends can be read as symptomatic of the way the show addresses issues of “difference” and “diversity” more generally. There is an underside to the fantasy of alternative families that *Friends* depicts, in other words, namely that this family is explicitly based on the exclusion of racial and ethnic others.

PRIME TIME FAMILIES

In her study of families on United States prime time television, Ella Taylor (1989) argues that there have been a series of shifts in the ways that families are depicted on television with these shifts reflecting, mirroring, and reworking larger societal trends. Arguing that television does not offer a direct representation of the “real world,” she suggests instead that “television speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual or collective lives, to complete what is incomplete, as well as to our desire to know what is going on out there in that elusive ‘reality.’ Television comments upon and orders, rather than reflects, experience, highlighting public concerns and cultural shifts” (3). While *Friends* may be the product of a specific set of

historical and material conditions, my aim is not to demonstrate that it accurately represents a “reality” that is out there. Rather I am interested in analyzing it as a text to suggest what kinds of fantasies and anxieties are contained within the show. Like Taylor, I see television offering a space where social anxieties are resolved in a kind of fantasy wish-fulfillment. And since social concerns change in different historical moments, so do the fantasy compensatory solutions.

Taylor argues that while in the 1950s television shows focused either entirely around work or the family, with the home providing a repository for the conflict and anxiety of work, by the 1970s shows instead depicted “work families” which blurred the boundaries between work and home life, and in which the public or professional realm provided a space of solidarity, intimacy, nurturing, and emotional intensity outside of the domestic sphere. Shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *M*A*S*H* depicted work families which could substitute for the perfect home life that seemed always out of reach: that utopian vision of a happy nuclear family life which Stephanie Coontz (1992) has referred to as “the way we never were.” While shows about the “work family” are still common (not least of which include *The X-Files* and *ER*), the 1990s have also witnessed the emergence of a new genre of sitcom about the “alternative family,” what David Wild has called the “pal-com” (1996, 67). Shows such as *Caroline in the City*, *Damon*, *Drew Carey*, *Ellen*, *Living Single*, *Seinfeld*, and *The Single Guy* focus primarily on home life, but with home life now often being defined as a chosen kinship network made up of friends (and sometimes co-workers) rather than biological family. Indeed, as its title suggests, *Friends* is simply about a group of friends. Monica and Rachel (who went to high school together) share one apartment, Chandler and Joey share another and they are neighbors in the same building. Phoebe (Monica’s former room-mate) lives with her grandmother, and Ross (Monica’s brother) lives alone. Monica and Rachel’s apartment serves as the affective center and shared familial space of the group, connecting *Friends* with a long and established tradition of television sitcoms like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *Laverne and Shirley*.

For Medhurst, the more obvious debt is to *thirtysomething*, with *Friends* attempting to depict the lives of young people after college, but before marriage and kids, and doing so with a resolutely 1990s sensibility of sparring with pop culture references laced with heavy irony. As I will suggest below, however, it is not so much that *Friends* is the “before” of *thirtysomething*, but rather that *Friends* questions whether *thirtysomething* is a desirable or possible end point in a teleological narrative of maturation. *Friends* does not offer an unproblematic endorsement of “marriage-and-kids” as a goal for young people in the 1990s: characters either have children but are not married, or will give birth but will not be the parent, or are neither married nor parents. And while the “three boys and three girls” format of the show suggests a neat pairing off into heterosexual couples (and this possibility is milked for all the sexual tension they can manage) this never happens. Instead *Friends* offers a fantasy of a domesticity where the lines between kinship, marriage, reproduction, affiliation, and love are blurred.

We may see these six friends work, we may (very occasionally) see them with their parents and relatives, and we may also see them dating and (rarely) with other friends. But the primary focus of the show is the relationships between these men and women who are not only each other's best friends but also each other's real "family." *Friends* thus captures and romanticizes the formation of alternative kinship networks made up of friends and neighbors, while also self-consciously citing and reworking sitcoms from the past and featuring characters who rely heavily on humor, and particularly irony, to survive.

THE PERSONAL IS IRONIC

The six central characters on *Friends* connect through their shared sense of irony and humor about modern life, and through the self-referentiality they bring to their often dismal lives and to their personal quirks: Monica is the neatness freak, Chandler is the king of the wisecrack, Phoebe the queen of the non-sequitur, Joey the "himbo," Rachel the domestically challenged fashion queen, and Ross the sensible career boy. Indeed, Ross is the only character who has sustained a meaningful career throughout the four seasons; his job as a paleontologist is both intellectually and financially rewarding. He is therefore, unsurprisingly, the only one who can afford to live alone. But he is also the butt of many jokes about his "nerdy" job. Chandler has also held one job in an office throughout the show, but he does not enjoy it. The other characters either change jobs (through choice or from being fired), or are unable to get employment at what they really want to do. Joey wants to be an actor but has earned money instead as a teacher, sales assistant, sperm donor, and a construction worker, with each of these jobs becoming opportunities for endless jokes and sightgags. For three seasons Rachel desperately wanted to be a buyer for a fashion store but instead worked as a waitress. In the fourth season she finally achieved her goal but only after a series of jokes that her sole credential was that she was a good shopper. Monica, on the other hand, lost her dream job as a chef at a prominent New York restaurant in the second season, and only recently got another job as a cook, although at a restaurant where she commands no respect. Instead, the show foregrounds how she plays "den mother" to the rest of the friends, and that she does so with enough self-consciousness and irony to prevent any easy gender stereotyping. Even Phoebe, the "hippie" character with no middle-class aspirations, was devastated when fired for kissing a massage client, and several episodes focused on her difficulty in getting a new job.

Their friendships thus compensate for some of the frustrations the characters have at work, and the show remains primarily focused on the friends' interactions in Central Perk (the Greenwich Village café where they congregate) or in one of their apartments. Their lives therefore center around private or leisure spaces, rather than work or public ones. The conceit of the show is the strength of the friendships between them all: friendships that are fueled by coffee and irony and which survive in spite of abysmal love lives, boring jobs, and neurotic and

dysfunctional families. *Friends* teaches us that the most important things in the world are to have a sense of humor and some good friends.

Until recently, much scholarship on the sitcom focused on the conservative impulse of the genre, with its form and predictability rendering it inevitably static (cf. Grote 1983). Indeed, as Jane Feuer (1992) suggests, sitcoms typically are defined by “the half-hour format, the basis in humor, [and] the ‘problem of the week’ that causes the hilarious situation and that will be resolved so that a new episode may take its place the next week” (146). But this describes only the formal qualities of the genre (the episodic structure, and that each episode returns to the equilibrium with which it begins) not its content. Feuer herself attempts to formulate a more complex and nuanced understanding of the genre arguing that “the sitcom develops by reacting to and against previous sitcoms” and is thus inherently self-reflexive and intertextual (151). For example, “Central Perk,” the neighborhood cafe where the friends congregate, is the 1990s equivalent of the bar in *Cheers*. And even the centrality of the “couch” (both in the apartments and in the coffee shop) not only suggests the ways that television changed the social geography of domestic spaces (cf. Spigel 1994), but also references the stereotype of the “couch potato” passively watching a sitcom. Indeed, one episode showed the friends entering Central Perk only to find the couch had disappeared. Their confusion about how to congregate as friends without the prop of the couch suggests the fragility of their group. Without the furniture, they do not know how to interact. Similarly, when Joey and Chandler move into the girls’ apartment after winning a bet, subsequent episodes depicted the anxiety Monica felt about no longer being the host for the group: the uncertainty of whether it was her hosting abilities or merely the location of the apartment which had made her and Rachel the familial center was never resolved. Instead, she and Rachel “stole” back their apartment while Joey and Chandler were out. Jokes like these about the couch and the apartment expose a crack in the otherwise solid friendships and reveal deep-seated anxieties about whether it is material objects which hold their relationships together, or genuine affective ties.

But like all sit-coms, *Friends* relies upon the possibilities for comedy in the pain of everyday life. *Friends* differs therefore in obvious ways from *ER*, *90210*, and *The X-Files* in that it is a comedy, and the idea of displacement is central to its generic structure. In comedy every moment of conflict becomes an opportunity for humor. Difficulties about families, work, and lovers are recuperated by casting them in terms of jokes to be shared with friends. Specifically, in *Friends* the trauma of familial and professional life are displaced onto the interpersonal realm, so that individual and personal goals and strategies become a substitute for social change. One of the most self-conscious instances of displacement occurred in an episode from the second season when Monica lost her job as a chef and then obsessively starts a fitness regime. The story-line within the show suggested that she used exercise as a displacement for dealing with the trauma of losing her job and not having a boyfriend. The ironic distance Monica maintained from her

symptomatic acting out was exemplary of the narrative of the show—the characters are all well versed in therapy jargon and can instantly analyze what they are doing, why they are doing it, and then crack a joke about it.

Indeed, since irony is a way to hold two contradictory ideas together at once, the pervasiveness of irony bespeaks a certain cognitive dissonance about the themes which the show portrays, and the difficulties in reconciling its utopian and dystopian impulses. As I have already suggested, the utopian promise of the show is that alternative families can substitute for both the failures of biological families and the failures of professional life. The underside of this utopian fantasy, however, is that *Friends* depicts a family full of anxieties about what it means to create a kinship network from a group of friends.

FAMILIES WE CHOOSE

The centrality of the alternative family in *Friends* is made clear in the show's mission statement. According to executive producers Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman, and David Crane, *Friends* "is a show about love, sex, careers, and a time of life when everything is possible. It's about searching for commitment and security—and a fear of commitments and security. And, most of all, it's a show about friendship—because when a person is young and single in the city, friends and family are synonymous."⁵ *Friends*, therefore, is self-consciously about the construction of alternative kinship networks in the face of the alienation and despair of modern urban life. Of course, while the producers may describe the show in this way, it in no way guarantees how *Friends* will be received by its audience. Furthermore, there are ways in which the producers' claims can be immediately undermined by suggesting that the show is not simply about the utopian aspects of creating a network of friends to compensate for urban professional life in the 1990s. After all, the problems and anxieties about work and romantic life that the characters negotiate are so completely constitutive of the relationships between them, that the problems themselves and the compensatory solutions become utterly inextricable.

In many ways *Friends* depicts an example of what cultural anthropologist Kath Weston (1991) calls the "families we choose." Although Weston's work is primarily about queer families, and specifically about how gay and lesbian kinship relationships often challenge the assumptions we have about the family within capitalism, her work is useful because of the ways she explores the social and political stakes of these new kinship networks. Part of Weston's project is to deconstruct the opposition between blood kin and chosen kin. Like "straight" families, families "of choice" remain the focus of affective life, but they also often incorporate other features such as the sharing of material and emotional resources, the organizing of co-parenting arrangements, and a common history. Alternative families are, therefore, typically a group of people with common social and economic needs and resources, and with a historical legacy and shared sense of future. Many of Weston's informants understandably invoke a utopian

aspect to these chosen families, saying that they have been able to create what was rarely available to people—a family environment which is emotionally and materially supportive, and made up of people with whom they have a special and close relationship. This emphasis on choice and self-creation, rather than on biology, and of the compensatory function families can provide is a central theme of *Friends*, whose premise is that even though they may have no control over their professional or romantic lives, the one thing these characters can control and change are their friendships, and hence the family community these friends become.

On the one hand, therefore, it is laudable that *Friends* depicts alternative families (straight and lesbian) which provide real emotional and social support for their members. After all, the question of how families and kinship networks are represented in the mass media is not a trivial one. Recent decades have witnessed major reconfigurations of what counts as “family”: from the Moynihan report of the 1960s to the rising divorce rate, from feminism and abortion rights to reproductive technologies and surrogate motherhood, from blended families and adoption to teenage single mothers, and from the increased reporting of child abuse to other dysfunctional familial patterns. The question of which relationships receive social legitimacy, and are represented in the media, remains a highly political one. For example, white working-class families, and many ethnic and racial groups in the United States, often create family and kinship patterns that in no way resemble the mythical American family. Like the kinship networks described in Weston’s fieldwork, these “alternative families”—which are often, of course, also “traditional” in the sense that they embody or exemplify traditional cultural values of particular class or racial groups—often provide the material or emotional resources that are unavailable within a capitalist mode of production. Indeed, as Stephanie Coontz (1992) argues, while the myth of the white, middle-class family dominates the media, not only do these myths distort the diverse experiences of other racial and socio-economic groups in the United States, but they also do not even describe most white, middle-class families accurately. Yet it is still the so-called traditional family which has the most cultural currency, and from watching TV you would never know that in the United States, the majority of the population does *not* live in a nuclear family.

The belief behind *Friends* is that the “families we choose” can substitute for badly paid jobs and dysfunctional relationships. This implies that there is neither a need nor an ability to address issues outside the realm of the interpersonal. *Friends* promotes the idea that you can put up with anything, so long as you have your room-mates or neighbors to come back to at the end of the day. While this alternative family provides a way for the friends to negotiate the divisions between their professional and their personal lives by compensating for the boredom, frustration, and economic uncertainty of their work lives, *Friends* nevertheless distances itself from contemporary discourses about race and ethnicity by showing these six men and women firmly situated within a white ethnic enclave in the context of a multicultural space, New York City. Indeed,

these two aspects of the show—the “alternative family” of friends and the unmistakable whiteness of this family—are impossible to disarticulate. Yet, the show does not simply or easily celebrate this “white family,” but rather seems ridden with anxieties about it. These anxieties are nowhere more strikingly evident than in the recurring jokes about incest among the group and their families. These jokes suggests that *Friends* can be read as a symptomatic response to anxieties of being white and middle-class in the contemporary United States. With this in mind, before turning to a discussion of whiteness in the show, I want to first move to an examination of the premiere episode from the third season (1996-97) where the trope of incest was most visibly evident.

THE FANTASY OF INCEST

Early on in the episode, Ross and Chandler attempt to “share” with each other like the women in the show do. Here we see a classic example of a recurring theme in *Friends*: the characters self-consciously inverting gender roles to highlight the constructedness of gender, but doing so in such a way that it finally reinforces existing stereotypes about men and women. Ross has discovered that Rachel (his then-girlfriend) told Monica and Phoebe about one of his sexual fantasies. Realizing that sharing is one of the ways that the women maintain their friendships, Ross decides to try and do the same with Chandler. It becomes clear, however, Chandler has no sense of the appropriate boundaries of “sharing,” and when Ross offers his sexual fantasy about Princess Leia in a gold bikini, Chandler counters with a confession that he often thinks about his mother when he is having sex with his girlfriend. Chandler’s comment is typical of his M.O., using jokes, irony, or exaggeration to deflect his real feelings, but with a degree of self-consciousness about the language of therapy that makes his comment even more pointed. Despite this self-consciousness, the scene suggests that this is why men do not share personal information with each other, because to do so is to reveal information that is too intimate or even, in this case, socially taboo. Here, sharing becomes not a utopian moment of male-bonding and emotional connection, but rather an instance of horror and disconnection. As Ross says to Chandler, “I told you to share, not scare.” The scene demonstrates in miniature what the show endlessly reaffirms: that men and women *are* fundamentally different, even hip young men and women of the 1990s, and that gender divisions should be respected and maintained. This trope of inverting and then restating gender divisions becomes another form of cognitive dissonance within the show— inverting gender roles to address the constraints men and women in the 1990s face, but pushing these inversions “too far” to reaffirm normative femininity and masculinity. Given that the show endlessly critiques heterosexual coupling, this reaffirmation of stereotypical feminine and masculine roles contributes to the cognitive dissonance about how to forge romantic and sexual relationships. The central characters are all framed as heterosexual, but heterosexual coupling *per se* remains highly problematic.

Chandler's confession also made explicit the connection between incest and the sex lives of the group of friends, a theme frequently explored in the program. On the one hand, a certain incestuousness is implied in the ways the group deals with each other and with outsiders. New lovers provide a source of conflict and are often rejected if they fail to meet with the approval of the group. Even though (until recently) the friends themselves did not get sexually involved with each other, there is an abundance of eroticized and ambivalent sexual energy between them, and jealousies are ignited when the friends get new lovers. In other words, sexual relationships outside of the group are fraught with problems. On the other hand, relationships within the group are coded as somehow inappropriate or unhealthy, jokes abound about the wrongness of any sexual attraction between characters, and numerous episodes have toyed with the weird notion that different characters might get together. This may be a group of friends creating an alternative family, but it is a family that operates primarily outside of the libidinal realm, or at least outside of the socially sanctioned and therapeutically healthy. *Friends* offers an alternative family where the group mentality is both a source of strength—outsiders break up the group, so it brings them together—and a source of trauma—when this inwardness becomes coded (literally in this episode, and metaphorically elsewhere) as a form of incest.

As I have already suggested, however, the relationships between the group are not entirely platonic. One episode in the third season was devoted to “flashbacks” to a time “before” the show started, showing how nearly all of them had “almost” become sexually involved with another in the group at some point or other. The trope of the flashback functions here in much the same way as dreams do, suggesting a wish-fulfillment or fantasy of what can never occur in the conscious or historically present world. Moreover, in the first two seasons much of the comic energy was generated by Ross's unrequited love for Rachel. When they got together, their coupling deprived the show of much of its comedy and sexual tension, putting a halt to one of the motors of the narrative. Consistent with the program's perspective, their being a couple was problematic. Indeed, the coda to the episode of Chandler's inappropriate “sharing” shows Rachel and Ross acting out the Princess Leia fantasy (a fantasy already coded as incestuous, given the narrative of *Star Wars*), but with Rachel's head replaced with that of Ross's mother, thereby making explicit and visible what has been previously only implied: forging sexual relationships within the group is the social equivalent of incest.

The theme of incest in this episode was not confined to Chandler's confession or to Rachel and Ross's sexual fantasy. Monica, who is dealing with her break-up with Richard (played by Tom Selleck), is broken-hearted and is playing with one of his cigar stubs she found in her apartment while re-playing some of his Civil War tapes. At the end of the episode she is visited by her father who, smoking Richard's cigar and watching Richard's Civil War videos, in some senses “becomes” Richard while Monica sleeps peacefully on the sofa next to him. Most recently, Phoebe's role as surrogate mother for her brother and sister-

in-law, where she is literally carrying her brother's child, suggestively plays with another version of "incest."

Here, then, we see the underside of Weston's alternative families. Whereas the kinship structures she examines are specifically organized around the shared social and erotic ties of a group of people, in *Friends* any kind of sexual relationship undermines the affective relationships within the group. The vision of an alternative kinship structure ostensibly provides a compelling compensatory fantasy whereby "families" can offer a sense of possibility rather than constraint. In *Friends* we see a group of men and women who together provide the kind of emotional support for each other that we traditionally associate with family life, yet their ties must remain platonic, not sexual. The anxieties around sex and erotic attachments is made clear, since any kind of romance becomes coded as a form of trauma.

Why doesn't the notion of alternative families work here? Why is this family of choice coded as one fraught with incestuous implications? Not only in this episode, but throughout the four seasons, jokes abound about the inappropriateness of all the sexual relationships within the group. One way of explaining this, I think, is to turn to some of the discussions about *Friends* in the media which point to anxieties within the show that are rarely addressed: specifically, anxieties about race.

THE WHITENESS OF THE HAIL

Friends is a show marked by its whiteness. It is also a show consumed primarily by white viewers (Hass 1998). Yet it is not the show itself which explicitly addresses this, other than doing what many TV shows with all white casts do, which is by taking it for granted. Instead it is the media discussions about *Friends* which have highlighted this aspect of the show. Oprah Winfrey, for example, famously criticized the problematic whiteness of *Friends*, saying "I'd like you all to get a *black* friend. Maybe I could stop by" (cited in Wild 1995, 69). Similarly, when one of the characters appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, many of the jokes were about the lack of black characters. Indeed, *Friends* depicts "difference" primarily through the representation of sexual minorities. While the recurring characters of Carol (Ross's ex-wife) and her life partner Susan have won the show an award for being "queer friendly," their characters are not fully fleshed out, and they seem to serve mainly as foils for homophobic jokes. For example, in one episode Ross visits Carol and Susan's apartment and, noticing how many lesbian-themed books they own, comments "gee, you must need to know a lot to be a lesbian." Such a comment about racial, ethnic, or religious-themed books seems unimaginable, suggesting that queerness is a "safe" form of difference, particularly when represented by two white, professional, and conventionally feminine, women. Moreover, much of the humor in the first season was generated by anxieties about homosexuality—such as Ross's general discomfort with Carol's lesbian lifestyle, Chandler's co-workers thinking he is gay,

and Joey and Chandler being mistaken for a couple. The presence of queer characters on the show does not, therefore, exempt *Friends* from the charge of presenting such a normative white middle-class kinship network. Not only does the show displace professional and work concerns into the realm of interpersonal friendships, but it also displaces questions of difference and marginality from the realm of class, ethnicity, and race onto the realm of sexual preference. Only occasional references to Joey's stereotypical Italian masculinity and uneven mentions of Ross and Monica's Jewish family mark the show's identity politics as not exclusively white-focused. There are rarely, if ever, men or women who are racially or ethnically different to the six main characters, and even background characters are almost always young and white, something that is remarkable for a show set in New York City.

While it is tempting to celebrate the way that *Friends* attempts to depict an alternative family and include lesbians as regular characters, by casting "difference" as only possible in the realm of sexual preference, differences based on race and ethnicity become unassimilable into the utopic vision of choosing an alternative kinship network. If alternative families provide material as well as emotional support, clearly these friends can only imagine material or emotional relationships with other white people. Similarly, if one of the definitions of alternative families is that they have a sense of history and a shared sense of future, clearly this is not the case for white families. By casting sexual and erotic relationships as a form of incest, the show suggests that the "family of choice"—the white ethnic enclave—is too inward looking and that it has no future.

I'm not suggesting that all TV shows with all white characters are unconsciously acting out anxieties about the experience of whiteness, or that *Friends* is only, or simply, about the crisis of racial identity in the contemporary United States. Nonetheless, for a show to have only white characters, and for them to never acknowledge their whiteness, indicates a certain level of disavowal. The self-conscious skits about whiteness performed on *Saturday Night Live* suggest that the whiteness of the show is not an unconscious phenomenon. The only time the show featured a non-white character—Ross briefly had an Asian-American girlfriend, Julie—she quickly disappeared and served mainly to foreground the group's inability to deal with someone who was "different" than them. The scene in which Rachel first meets Julie and thinks she is Chinese is excruciating in its racism, no matter how ironic its intent. Julie's friendship with Monica also threatens the group and demonstrates its fragility. When Julie and Monica go on a shopping spree in one of Julie's rare appearances on the show, it undermines and threatens the friendship between Monica and Rachel, and within the group as a whole. Clearly, Julie could not last, for she represented too great a challenge to the group's cohesion. Sure enough, after a few episodes, Ross remembers his love for Rachel and ends his romance with Julie. Difference is therefore not merely ignored or erased, but explicitly coded as a form of disruption. Indeed, the recent romance between Ross and his white English girlfriend Emily suggests once

again that difference can only be accommodated when it is "safe" and will not upset the fragility of the group.

CONCLUSION

As I said, I am not trying to argue that *Friends* represents a "reality" about alternative families among young, white, urban, men and women in the 1990s. Instead, I have been more interested in thinking about *Friends* as a fantasy space on television where some social and cultural anxieties become temporarily resolved, although, as I suggested, the pervasiveness of irony and self-consciousness immediately problematizes any easy notion of clear "resolution." Despite the irony, however, *Friends* is clearly invested in making visible those kinship arrangements which challenge the dominant myth of the nuclear family. Yet, as Rosemary Hennessy (1995) has suggested, "visibility" in consumer culture does not represent an unmediated apprehension of reality, but is always socially constructed. Furthermore, the visibility of some identities is often only possible through the invisibility of others. Drawing on the notion of the "fetish" as used by both Freud and Marx, Hennessy argues that the fetishistic visibility of certain identities and groups in consumer culture often hides as much as it reveals, with the visibility of those identities functioning precisely to avoid seeing what is rendered invisible.

Here, then, is a useful framework to understand the hyperbolic visibility of some kinship networks on *Friends* over others. It is not that the show is "bad" or "wrong" to depict lesbian couples, surrogate mothers, and single/divorced young people. We should welcome representations which challenge heteronormativeness. But it is important to question which identities are "representable" and which remain outside of the realm of the "visible." The fantasy of alternative families on *Friends* not only often uses non-normative family relations as a scapegoat for jokes, but even when they are taken seriously, they efface and exclude other groups of people. The use of irony thus functions as a rhetorical mode which captures the cognitive dissonance of the show: holding together the contradictory notion that the hyper-visibility of some identities can often be at the expense of the erasure of others. The "personal" may substitute for the professional in *Friends*, but what constitutes the "personal" remains highly partial.

Friends is a show that knows its whiteness is problematic, and it also knows that it is a show depicting the creation of an alternative community, or a new kind of family. Clearly, much is at stake in a show which valorizes choosing a white family, and *Friends* does demonstrate some of the limitations of self-creation as a way of dealing with romantic, familial, and economic concerns. While it is not the job of a weekly sitcom to teach us how to deal with race, class, gender, or sexuality, shows such as *Friends* nevertheless perform important cultural and ideological work in terms of how such issues are represented. In this sense, *Friends* demonstrates what Newcomb and Hirsch (1994) have called "television as a cultural forum"—that television is a medium in which raising questions is as

important as answering them. Certainly *Friends* raises important questions in terms of how young people survive in the city when they are emotionally and geographically distant from their families and other forms of social support. The show also valiantly attempts to make its lesbian characters “real,” even when it seems to fail so obviously. Moreover, *Friends* does not explicitly offer “answers” to the problems it points to, other than celebrating the benefits of creating a kinship network from one’s friends. But while the notion of television as a cultural forum is a useful one, there are profoundly troubling questions about a form of culture which posits only questions and no answers. To suggest that simply raising an issue is sufficient sidesteps television’s real powers: to offer new ideas, new models of family, new ideas about who counts as kin. The recurring theme of incest within the group and that their kinship network “just happens” to be a white ethnic enclave suggests that all is not as positive and celebratory as the show’s mission-statement would have us believe.

NOTES

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1. The later demands by the casts of *ER* and *Seinfeld* now, of course, make the *Friends* negotiations pale in comparison.
2. At one point, *Friends* had more web-sites devoted to it (98) than any other TV show (Burr 1996).
3. The phrase “haven in a heartless world” is from Lasch, 1977.
4. Cited in Wild, 1996, 69.
5. From publicity material on NBC’s homepage: www.nbc.com.

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