We Are Family? Spanish Law and Lesbian Normalization in *Hospital Central*

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After four decades of a repressive dictatorial regime during which homosexuality was banned and punished with prison sentence and electroshock, Spain became a democratic country in 1978. The so- cial, political, and legal debates previous to the passing of the law on same-sex marriage in June 2005 fueled lesbian visibility in the media. Considering that the emergence of lesbian representation has been linked to these social and political changes, our contri- bution centers on the ways in which the prime time TV series Hospital Central *unravels as a vehicle for the normalization of lesbian relationships and families as addressed to a mostly heterosexual audience.*

KEYWORDS Catholic, class, culture, family, fascist dictatorship, heteronormativity, homophobic, Hospital Central*, identity politics, normalization, representation, same-sex marriage, Spain, TV series, visibility*

The representation of lesbians in Spanish television series is a recent phenomenon that has taken place only in the twenty-first century. Whereas in Anglophone countries some TV sitcoms and dramas vindicated a lesbian presence and existence in the 1990s, Spain was still suffering a political and cultural paralyzing lethargy in terms of lesbian visibility. This lack of visibility also extended to the Spanish mainstream film industry, which did not focus on lesbianism as a non-pathological and non-perverse type of identity until 2001, with the release of the comedy feature film *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres*, (Inés París and Daniela Fejerman, 2001). Up to 2001, then, the portrayal of lesbianism in Spanish cinema continued the historical trend of representing lesbians as "perverts and monsters who must be punished and destroyed" (Kabir, 1998: 3). The few images of lesbian desire found in television series also followed the pattern of abu- sive and distorting representations of lesbianism. This could be seen in *After School* (*Al salir de clase*), a prime-time teenage soap opera aired from 1997 to 2002 on Telecinco, which narrated the family lives and love affairs of a group of friends. Most significantly for our purposes here, *Al salir de clase* was known for being the first Spanish television series that depicted homo- sexual characters, both male and female. However, while the series overtly spoke about the gay identity embodied by Santi (Alejo Sauras), positing it naturally and

even celebrating it, the series offered a dreadful and deplorable treatment of lesbian identity. Thus, we could see Clara (Laura Manzanedo), *the* lesbian, as somebody unfriendly, shunned by all the girls, and harassing Miriam (Maria´n Aguilera), the girl she loved. Clara was at best portrayed as mentally disturbed when, after being rejected by Miriam, she set fire to her house. Furthermore, in order to save Clara from madness, the series hetero- sexualized her, and so she stopped wearing baggy clothes and shaggy hair, and became straight, pretty, and sexy, as she had affairs with most of the male starring characters. The conversion of Clara back into the heterosexual fold was but a common homophobic and sexist leitmotif pervading most narratives of lesbianism throughout the twentieth century.

On the other hand, the audience had to wait until 2000 to see the first regular lesbian character in a Spanish TV series. This was the case of Diana (Anabel Alonso) in the prime- time multiplot sitcom *Seven Lives* (*Siete Vidas*, Telecinco). The depiction of this rather clumsy character was so stereotyped that it verged on caricature; albeit sexy, clad in tight low-cut dresses that highlighted her big breasts and hips, and desired by men, she was rendered as a female version of the stereotypical sex-starved straight man desperate to have sex with whatever woman was around. For its part, *Hell's Neighborhood* (*Aqu´ı no hay quien viva,* Antena 3 2003–2006), a prime-time sitcom centered on the misunderstandings and practical jokes among the residents of a lower-middle-class block of flats, presented a couple of camp gay neighbors as regular characters. In 2004 the series introduced a lesbian character: Bea (Eva Isanta), a long-haired, chic blonde who became the roommate of one of the gay men. Apart from being depicted as a single who unsuccessfully tried to seduce all her (straight) pretty neighbors, her main trait was her urgent need to get pregnant before she was too old. Like Diana in *Siete Vidas*, Bea was the butt of jokes for her unsatisfied sexual appetite, while the comic tone of both series left no room for any serious commentary on contemporary Spanish society or homophobia apart from the criticism that can be launched against these very series for the latent lesbiphobia upon which part of their humor was based. As will be discussed later, it is only after the passing of the law on same-sex marriage in Spain that a more normalized approach to lesbian characters is portrayed in a national TV series like *Hospital Central.* Thus, one of our main contentions in this article is to highlight the predictable, reciprocal relationship between lesbian visibility and

normalization on the one hand and its materialization solely in accordance with current identity politics legislation on the other.

Not coincidentally, the absence of cultural and political parameters through which to create new sites of identity and identification for lesbian audiences has been inherently linked to the historical, cultural, and political context of Spain in the last four decades. After thirty-six years of fascist dictatorship under the Franco regime (1939–1975), during which time homo- sexuality was banned and punished with prison sentence and electroshock, Spain became a democratic country in 1978, when the new Constitution was approved. During the Franco era, male homosexuals were jailed un- der social danger and public scandal laws. In this sense, the Vagrants and Malefactors Law (Ley de vagos y maleantes) criminalized homosexuality as well as vagrants and prostitutes with a prison sentence. This law considered homosexuals "equal to pimps and scoundrels to be interned into special institutions and totally isolated as a way to avoid the spread of contamina tion" (Sánchez, 2000: 30). As recently as 1970, this law was replaced by the Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law (Ley de peligrosidad y rehabilitación social), and in 1971, the Ministry of Education issued an Act which "banned homosexuals from elementary schools due to their so called physical defect or sickness" (Sánchez, 2000: 30). It is estimated that over 5,000 males were arrested, humiliated, and jailed for being homosexuals (Arnalte, 2003). While these records allow the narrativization of male homosexuality in Spain, there are no data regarding repression against lesbians under this law.
Even though the Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law was not officially abolished until 1995, after the dictator's death and with the birth of the Constitution a new era began for the representation of male homosexuality on Spanish screens. As Peter Evans (1995) notes, "Spanish filmmakers rushed to speak the unspeakable, confronting the realities of everyday living, acknowledging the inseparability of art from the frameworks of history and tradition" (326). Yet, the absence of female (not to say lesbian) filmmakers in Spain has contributed to the lack of positive representations of lesbians. This is not to say that only those representations of lesbians made by women or lesbians are progressive and reasonable; however, the lack of a collective sense of lesbian identity politics in Spain, much less the country's cinematic circles, would necessarily limit the exploration of this theme in

filmic production. In actuality, it can be said that Spain suffered a backwardness of at least twenty years in terms of the configuration of minority identities. Unlike other Western countries in which identity categories such as gender, sex, sexuality, race, or class were being theorized, filmed, questioned, and reconceptualized, in Spain "the past historical memories of lesbians have been lost forever" (Gimeno, 2005: 192). Furthermore, it was only when the Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) obtained the majority of votes in 1982—administering the government until 1996—that the cultural and social context of Spain seemed more prone to articulating a progressive discourse of identity politics. However, as Sánchez (2000) points out, "[W]hile in Anglophone countries the lesbian and gay community continued to provide an example of a visible and viable public sphere fiercely critical of the establishment, in Spain the majority of the community moved away from political vindications, claiming that they did not suffer the burden of governmental hostility" (120). Admittedly, at this time of political normalcy, gays and lesbians in Spain did not suffer any governmental hostility simply because we did not exist, and neither did the terms "by which we are recognized as human" (Butler, 2004: 2). This subtle institutional violence exerted on queer identities must be understood as the pervading enactment of heteronormativity as the reified institution through which only binary and stable notions of gender and sexuality are considered natural and normal.

In striving against hegemonic discourses of identity that constrain the recognition of gay and lesbian identities it is important to bear in mind the concept of "culture" and how the language it uses works through representation, since culture is a vehicle for the construction and transmission of meaning. Culture, as a political weapon, is central to the meaning-making process of identity categories such as race, class, or sexuality, thus becoming an essential site of social and political intervention. British cultural thinker Stuart Hall (1997) has interestingly suggested that the conceptualization of identity always takes place within cultural representation, and that it depends on the historical specificity of that representation (33). For Hall, culture is a site of ongoing struggle in which meaning and the practice of stereotyping can be challenged, contested, and transformed. Accordingly, identity is considered a production always in the process of being redefined. In Hall's words,

> Cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like anything which is histor- ical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. (52)

Following Hall's argument, it can be stated that as much as our past his- tory and culture have either denied the existence of lesbian identities or disturbingly attached them to "moral weakness, mental sickness or personal inadequacy" (Dyer, 2002: 2), the recent political and cultural changes have also prompted a "normalized" representation of gays and lesbians not only in Spanish cinema but also in TV series.

Fortunately, the "continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" Hall refers to has meant a radical turn of the screw in contemporary Spanish society, culture, and politics. Thus, after eight years (1996–2004) of political and cultural backlash under the conservative government of José María Aznar (PP), José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) was elected president of the Spanish government in April 2004. One year later, the Congress of Deputies approved a bill that would allow gay and lesbian couples to marry and adopt children. On June 30, 2005, the bill became law, and Spain became the third country in the world to permit same-sex marriage. Despite the rapid legal and political legitimatization of same-sex marriage, the passing of this law was and still is a very controversial issue, especially among Catholic authorities and PP politicians and voters who, just immediately after its approval, lodged an appeal against it for being anti-constitutional. Amazingly, for the first time in Spain the main Catholic bishops led continuous demonstrations in the streets, claiming the abolition of the law because, for them, homosexuality is ethically and morally an abominable practice. With the support of the PP, the Spanish Catholic Church has gone even further and has called for conscientious objection among Catholic judges and majors not to carry out homosexual weddings. Ironically enough, it is those who have historically stolen our personal freedom and dignity, making us non-human, that claim heterosexual parents, who must have the right to live with a "normal" family. Indeed, one of the most common homophobic arguments marshaled against same-sex marriage focuses on the figure of the "poor child," a "cathected site for anxieties about cultural purity

and cultural transmission" (Butler, 2004: 112). In this way, the defenders of such a pure cultural transmission argue that "same-sex marriages will be a source of endless destruction and suffering for the Spanish society" (Altozano, 2005: 40) because, as their slogans in the demonstrations read, "Family Does Matter."[8] For the sake of the child's right to have a mother and a father and, by extension, for the sake of the whole country, *the* family must be composed by a heterosexual woman and a heterosexual man, thus keeping the social and symbolic order intact. What is at stake here is not only the continuation of heteronormativity as the only intelligible "natural" law, but also the prohibition and condemnation of other structures of kinship. Apart from their common beliefs in a rigid and dual configuration of the sexes and in homosexuality as a disease, the other argument that has been made against the passing of same-sex marriages is that "it is fine that homosexuals have the same rights; however, their unions cannot be named 'marriage' because 'marriage' is a sacred word" (40). The idea that what language reflects is a fixed, natural, and almost divine order becomes but another homophobic effect of their self-righteous claim of moral they struggle for freedom now. More specifically, they demand freedom for the "poor child" of non- and human superiority, which blinds them from seeing language as both a human construct and a potential site of cultural and sexual transformation and resignification.

Despite continuous attacks launched against same-sex marriage, the legitimatization of homosexual marriages by the State has indeed opened up new ways of cultural representation for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans- gender (LGBT) community in Spain. Although the social assimilation of same-sex marriages will obviously take some time, the new regulation provides at least "for a more decent country, because a decent society does not humiliate its members," as President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero stated in the Congress of Deputies (June 30, 2005). Thus, it is in this line of (re)presenting lesbianism as human decency that the following pages will analyze *Hospital Central*, the first Spanish TV series portraying a lesbian relationship as a normalized identity. For this purpose, special attention will be paid to how the creation of the lesbian characters mirrors the political and cultural changes that our country has gone through recently. It is as if in order to depict lesbians as normal people, we must first be legitimized and legalized by law. Considering the new

situation, it is no surprise that the depiction of a serious lesbian relationship in the prime-time drama *Hospital Central* has been received with enthusiasm by the lesbian community at large.

The series, first aired on Telecinco on April 30, 2000, centers on the professional and personal lives of the staff working in an E.R. in Madrid. After sustaining a reasonably high audience share during its first seven seasons, audience rates rocketed with the arrival of lesbian pediatrician Maca Fernández- Wilson (Patricia Vico) in season 8 (September 7, 2004). Even though Vico is a heterosexual, straight-looking actress, her performance made lesbian spectators aware of her character's lesbianism right from the start. Maca's serious, self-assured, independent, and professionally dominant attitude appeared as a rather "masculine" signifier that countered her highly feminine looks—she is portrayed as the typical Spanish, Mediterranean beauty: tall, slim, with long dark hair, wearing tight sexy clothes and high-heel boots. Yet, in subsequent episodes she is shown driving a powerful motorcycle, wearing leather—although still tight and sexy—jackets, and saying as many swear words as her male colleagues.

Complicity between Maca and the audience is sustained through several episodes as her lesbianism, once clear for the general audience, is gradually disclosed to other characters in the series. This allows for spectators' disavowal of their own reaction by laughing at the comic situations that arise when those other characters become aware of the news. While gossip spreads that Maca belongs to a wealthy family from Jerez and that years be- fore she had jilted a man on their wedding day, she starts showing interest for Esther García (Fátima Baeza), head nurse. Esther is an ugly-duckling heterosexual woman of working-class origin whose tough luck men-wise had been a constant throughout the previous seven seasons. Esther's relationship with Maca will involve a radical change in the nurse's lifestyle and social status. Their class difference, clear from the outset, is evident even in the two characters' family names: while García, one of the commonest surnames in Spain, denotes simplicity, Maca's flamboyant, hyphenated Fernádez-Wilson evokes both upper class in its hyphen and exoticism in the foreign "Wilson." Along this line, Esther's rural background contrasts with Maca's sophistication: she opens up a new world to Esther by taking her to the most expensive and fashionable nouvelle-cuisine restaurants and buying clothes for her in a sequence that overtly recalls

the famous scenes in the film *Pretty Woman* (8:16). As their relationship develops, Esther undergoes a process of trans- formation into a more attractive, sophisticated, and even slimmer woman, adopting most of Maca's acquired tastes and going up the social ladder. Being or becoming a lesbian, then, appears as a phenomenon more accessible to upper-class, cultivated women who enjoy economic independence, thereby portraying lesbianism as something positive yet removed from the average Spaniard.

The process of Esther's falling in love with the pediatrician and the acknowledgment thereof is symptomatic of the treatment given to the issue of lesbianism in the series. The first significant sign becomes apparent when Maca gives Esther a ride on her bike to the hospital. After describing the ride as a thrilling experience that makes her legs tremble, the nurse later rejects Maca's offer to take her home on her bike, as Esther words it, "[F]or fear not of falling but of rushing in" (8:4). The pleasure of titillation yet fear of lesbian sex is represented through the nurse's reaction when, in the doctor's office, Maca kisses her neck and invites her to spend the weekend together in Maca's mountain cottage; Esther becomes frantic at the suggestion and literally rushes out of the office despite the unexpected pleasure betrayed by her face (8:6). One of the controversial aspects of their relationship, which begins in the following episode (8:7), is that, contrary to Maca, whose lesbian identity is taken for granted, the head nurse was straight before. This brings about two different matters: first, we find the so hackneyed subject of the woman who becomes a lesbian because of her bad experiences with men, loving a woman thus being a second best, and being likely to become a man- hater in the common heterosexual imaginary. Second, Esther never seems to have any identity crisis or conflict with the fact that she has fallen for a woman, which runs parallel to the series' attitude as repeatedly expressed by Vico: the plot is not about a lesbian relationship but about two persons who love each other regardless of their sex (Arrastia, 2005; López, 2005; Rodríguez, 2005; Vico, 2005). This maneuver implies not only the negation of the emotional turmoil that such change usually produces in the person who experiences it—whose exploration might be not only helpful for some lesbians but also "didactic" for heterosexual spectators—but, worse still, a denial of lesbian identity as such. Indeed, Esther is thereafter shown as a woman who still likes men but loves Maca, thus de-lesbianizing her and eradicating straight men's fear of women becoming lesbian and

independent from them. As Gimeno (2005) states, "[T]here is nothing more unsettling for men in all eras than imagining that women do not need them sexually, that the phallus upon whose power patriarchy has been erected is nothing" (90).

Hence media portrayals of lesbians since the 1990s insist, as is the case of *Hospital Central*, in offering an unthreatening image of "lesbian chic," that is, lesbian characters who are conventionally attractive according to a heterosexual beauty canon and who enjoy being desired by straight men edged strategy that favors the male heterosexual point of view. One of the medical subplots focuses on the relationship between two sweet and feminine teenage springboard jumpers who have an accident and happen to be in love. On the one hand, this couple works as a background against which the main storyline is set and as a mirror where Esther can see her reflection, as she had never met any other lesbians. Yet, on the other hand, the girls are the excuse for letting the heterosexual male keep a hold on the situation and reinterpret it for his own benefit. This stand is embodied by Héctor (Roberto Drago), a young Argentine doctor who, unknowingly, starts telling Esther and Maca about his idealized view of the two girls—"lesbian but pretty," which arouses him, as he says—and their love: "tender, spiritual, pure love unpolluted by the aggressiveness of testosterone." The shadow of lesbian sex independent from men is thus overridden by the male fantasy of two pretty girls playing puppy love while, by extension, Maca and Esther's relationship is desexualized from the start. For its part, this subplot is used for the denial of yet another important part of lesbian identity: in her new state, Esther asks Maca whether she knew that the two girls were lesbians, to which Maca answers, "No clue, Esther. The word 'lesbian' is not written on our foreheads." By straightforwardly dismissing the existence of "gaydar" the series is erasing what has been one of the essential strategies of survival throughout decades: the ability to spot one another and get together. Difference in the formation of lesbian identity is yet again denied for the sake of normalization through another adolescent patient who comes out to Maca and asks her what to do. Maca's reply—"nothing special, the same things your friends do" (10:4)—although possibly intended to soothe young spectators who may feel the same as the character, is a harmful negation of all the suffering and difference gone through by lesbian and gay teenagers in Spain in the past decades due to repression and lack of referents. Furthermore, as Gimeno points out (313), lesbians in Spanish TV series—and *Hospital Cen-*

tral is no exception—are shown in isolation, with no sense of belonging to a lesbian community; the established heterosexual order is thus safe, because women who love other women are just the rare exception in a heterosexual world.

Although there is no sense of lesbian community in *Hospital Central*, the straight world where these two characters live bears scarce resemblance to the reality of contemporary Spanish society. The recent increase of lesbian and gay visibility and the threat that the achievement of legal rights has posed to the reactionary section of the country have produced a considerable rise of homophobic attacks. However, their environment is presented as a lesbian paradise free from homophobia where everybody accepts them—with or without visible effort. For a start, both Esther's and Maca's families show little resistance toward their daughters' new relationship. Within the hospital, reactions seem to depend on social class and education: while all doctors and nurses find their relationship absolutely normal, the two lower-rank colleagues and comic characters, receptionist Teresa (Marisol Rolandi) and orderly Rusti (Angel Pardo) give voice to the misconceptions and prejudices embraced by the ignorance of the general population. Thus, while Rusti asks Esther about her sexual life "to stop being ignorant" (8:7), Teresa, in her mid-fifties, at first believes "it's unnatural" and tries to avoid the thought of two women "sleeping together" (8:17). In fact, the only homophobic verbal attacks in the six seasons dealing with their relationship come from a potential landlord, who refuses to rent his flat to the two women when he realizes they are a couple (8:18), and from a patient's mother, who does not allow Maca to check her daughter's chest, arguing that "who knows what such a degenerate wanted to do" to her daughter (10:4). However, the series itself betrays its own lesbiphobia through the discriminatory treatment of the characters' sexual life. Thus, whereas all the other couples of the staff are shown at some point in passionate encounters on beds or even office desks, Maca and Esther are only depicted kissing on the lips in enclosed places like elevators or dressing rooms—most kisses being interrupted by the unexpected entrances of other colleagues—to the point that several members of a blog on lesbian content have ironically called them "the girls with no tongues" (El Aviaducto, 2006).

The lesbian relationship in *Hospital Central* has never questioned heteronormativity, and neither woman has shown any interest in feminist activism or lesbian rights. Nevertheless, if their independent existence ever posed any threat whatsoever to heterosexual stability, that possibility was radically erased by their rapid redirecting to the realm of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood. Remarkably enough, instead of going ahead of the times and posing any challenge, the series has been adapting to legal changes as these are taking place and using the same argument as the government: the need for normalization. Thus, the lesbian plot began when the Socialist Party (PSOE) had already been in power for five months and the law on same-sex marriage was expected because it was an electoral promise. Likewise, Maca and Esther's wedding episode was aired on December 14, 2005, six months after the law was passed. As a reassertion that the lesbian couple is just like any other, their decision to get married comes soon after they fall in love, and their appearances in the following episodes center exclusively on the arrangements for the event. Apart from the semi-serious debates around whether a wedding of two brides should have godparents as in "normal" weddings, the arrangements bring about comic situations, like the fact that both women think of buying the same dress for the occasion which, ironically enough, is apple-green. This coincidence is doubtlessly a joke on one of the most unintelligible and "celebrated" sentences that came up in the public debates that sprang up when the law on same-sex marriage was being discussed in Parliament. To clarify, Ana Botella (2004), City Councilor of Social Affairs in Madrid at that time and the wife of right-wing former President José María Aznar (PP), defended her position against same-sex marriage with the following solid, convincing argument:

> Marriage between homosexuals implies approaching what is different in a similar way. If two apples are added up, then, they give two apples. If an apple and a pear are added up, they can never give two apples because they are different components. Man and woman is one thing, which is marriage, and two men or two women will be a different thing. (2004)

Jokes about her logic became so popular among the LGBT community in Spain that even a website on LGBT issues was created under the rubric "dosmanzanas.com" (2005; literally "twoapples.com").

The wedding episode (10:13) was followed by Maca's urgent wish to get pregnant, which soon materialized through a hormone treatment and insemination from a sperm bank after the stereotypical, ridiculously rendered scenes of the women's failed attempts to find an adequate donor among their fellow doctors. This process of family foundation so instrumental in creating a normalized image of lesbian relations, however, is immediately destabilized by a subplot that reveals the script-writers' prejudice regarding this issue. The fact that, from a heterosexual viewpoint, the child will be the son of only one of them is evinced by Esther's selfish attitude when she complains of being fed up with Maca's pregnancy and with her being "the protagonist" (11:15). On top of that, their marriage is represented as utterly weak when, during Maca's maternity leave, which she spends with her family in Jerez, Esther's loneliness leads her to have a one-night affair with another doctor, Raú (Iván Sanchez), that gets her accidentally pregnant (12:12). The infidelity, which provokes a break up on Maca's part (although there is a subsequent reconciliation), is but an- other reassuring tap on male straight spectators' shoulders to reinforce the idea that lesbian women are still available for sex with men, who, therefore, "will not consider that they have been forced to concede any ground" (Ashton, 1996: 172).

Such an early betrayal is but an indication of the little faith in the naturalness and strength of lesbian-parented families, which is what supposedly the series intended to defend. Yet, despite its many flaws and stereotypes, *Hospital Central* has managed to attract and mobilize a lesbian audience starved of representations. In fact, in contrast to the isolation in which Maca and Esther are shown, a side-effect of the series' focus on a lesbian relation- ship has been the creation of many fan sites, blogs, and chat rooms, where lesbian women meet not only to discuss the different episodes, but also to ask for and give advice about issues like coming out or how to deal with homophobia at work, and even to cyber flirt. In short, *Hospital Central* has helped create a sense of community among many lesbians, even beyond national frontiers, as the demands of women from European countries and the United States have made some bloggers upload English-subtitled episodes on the Internet. The impact produced by the series is also evident in the two actresses' accounts of the hundreds of letters they receive from girls who feel identified with them and who have felt reassured in their coming out by seeing their representations on TV (Arranz, 2005; Arrastia, 2005; López, 2005). Moreover, the

LGBT community has acknowledged the positive side of such representation through the various awards it has given to the two actresses' joint performance (Arranz, 2005; López, 2005; Santos, 2005). All in all, whether we love or hate these stereotyped lesbian characters, *Hospital Central* represents the first and so far only serious attempt to bring Spanish lesbians to the fore. Although it can be said that mainstream Spanish TV series will rarely create images of non-straight looking lesbians that subvert hegemonic notions of gender, it is also true that their mere visibility offers more possibilities of gender contestation than their absence. As shown throughout our analysis, the correlation between the normalization of lesbian visibility and political power becomes relevant, at least for a country that, in the span of three decades, has undergone astonishing changes in the fight for equal rights and dignity of non-heteronormative identities in general and of the lesbian community in particular.

NOTES

1. In 1994, independent filmmaker Marta Balletbo-Coll released her first feature film, *Costa Brava*, a refreshing comedy that depicts the relationship between Montserrat (Desi Del Valle), an Israeli engineer working in Barcelona and Anna (Marta Balletbo-Coll), a tourist guide. *Costa Brava* is, then, the first Spanish film offering a positive portrayal of lesbians; however, unlike *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres*, *Costa Brava* did not reach a mainstream audience because it has only been released in independent women's film circuits.

2. In this light, the few lesbians known throughout the history of Spanish cinema have been defined either as alienated women surrounded by violence, drugs, and murders, as seen in the almost gore "WIP" (women in prison) feature film *Battered Flesh* (*Carne Apaleada*, Javier Aguirre, 1977), or as erotic objects of desire for male heterosexuals. Thus, *The Periscope* (*El Periscopio*), is an erotic feature film directed by José Ramó Larraz (1978) in which the protagonist is a teenage boy who masturbates while watching his lesbian neighbors having sex. This apology of morbid voyeurism is also found in the soft porn erotic comedy *The Lesbians and the Horny Girl Julieta* (*Las lesbianas y la caliente niña Julieta*, Ignacio Iquino, 1982), where three "horny lesbians" have sex in front of their husbands. Apart from these and a few similar movies, only Pedro Almodovar's filmic narratives have included lesbian characters, albeit reduced to minor appearances, as just another ingredient in his melting pot of queer characters.

3. All the translations from sources in Spanish are ours.

4. The only testimony in this respect has been compiled by Beatriz Gimeno (2005), one of the few Spanish lesbian feminists whose work attempts to write the history of lesbianism in Spain. In her research, she refers to a woman who, in being perceived as a lesbian in the early 1970s, was subjected to an electroshock treatment in a mental hospital. Since then, this woman needed psychiatric assistance until her death in 2001. This story has been recently recounted in the film *Electroshock* (Juan Carlos Claver, 2006). According to Gimeno "lesbians were put in asylums, unlike gays who were jailed" (191).

5. It was during the transition period (1975–1978) that the first mainstream feature films dealing with male homosexuality as another option of sexual identity appeared. Some of the most relevant filmic works are *Hidden Pleasures* (*Los placeres ocultos*, Eloy de la Iglesia, 1976), *Sex Change* (*Cambio de sexo*, Vicente Aranda, 1977), *A Man Named Autumn Flower* (*Un hombre llamado flor de otoño*, Pedro Olea, 1977) or *Ocaña, Intermittent Portrait* (*Ocaña, retrato intermitente*, Ventura Pons, 1978). For further information, see Sáchez.

6. The only signs of identity subversion could be found in the so-called "Movida," a countercultural movement mainly centered on alternative music that was born as a reaction against the repression and censorship of the Franco era. Although the "Movida" was at first officially recognized in an attempt to showcase a new modern Spain, it was soon relegated to cultural oblivion because of the consumption of drugs and the spread of AIDS.

7. The President of the Episcopal Conference, Ricardo Bláquez, is still urging Catholic people to fight a "crusade against evil" because, according to him, "the State behaves improperly in a democracy violating personal freedom" (2007).

8. The heading of "Family Does Matter" was accompanied by the protesters' chanted slogan of "Woman and man equal marriage, man and man, or woman and woman equal madhouse. It's obvious children cannot vote!" (Alfageme, 2005: 39). ("¡Mujer y hombre igual a *matrimonio*, hombre y hombre o mujer y mujer igual a *manicomio*. ¡Cómo se nota que el niño no vota!"). Please note that the rhyme between "matrimonio" (marriage) and "manicomio" (madhouse) is lost in the translation.

9. This symbiotic relationship between the passing of a law regarding queers' rights and its subsequent materialization in TV series has become common grounds, as will be also seen in *Ulysses' Syndrome* (*El síndrome de Ulises). Ulysses' Syndrome* (coming in October 2007) will be the first Spanish TV series that portrays the life of Gloria, a transsexual woman, and mother of a blind daughter. The character of Gloria is played by Carla Antonelli, a political activist and coordinator of the LGBT area in the Socialist Group (PSOE). Her work in this group has been fundamental for the passing of the "Gender Identity Law" (Ley de Identidad de Género), passed on March 17, 2007, which allows transsexual and transgender people to change their gender officially without necessarily going through surgery.

10. The issue of mainstream representations of a notably underrepresented group like lesbians is a highly controversial matter. Although these images may counteract the stereotype (still in force in Spain) of the lesbian as ugly, slovenly, unfashionable, and asexual, they doubtlessly fall into another stereotype: that of the lipstick lesbian of the male heterosexual fantasy. Moreover, none of the few lesbian characters that appear in the subsequent seasons is masculine, because a butch character would not be desirable to straight men and would therefore challenge the hetero-patriarchal order. Thus, even though the heterosexual audience may come to respect an idealized feminine lesbian just because they cannot identify her as such, the series does little favor to masculine and androgynous lesbians, who are even more despised and attacked on the streets since the debates on same-sex marriage made lesbians more visible. Needless to say, Spanish media are far from showing any lesbian that is non-White, despite the growth of immigrant communities in the country throughout the last decade.

11. Several studies carried out by national LGBT associations have shown that fifty percent of homosexual high school students suffer from homophobic bullying. After a few cases of suicide, some high schools have started taking measures to counteract this problem (Larrañeta, 2006).

12. Despite her initial prejudices, Teresa becomes Maca's witness at her wedding and her ignorance is the source of some jokes. For instance, when she gives the couple a piece of pottery used for turning over big omelets as a present, Rusti and Maca laugh at the reference to omelets since "tortillera" (omelet maker) is a pejorative term to refer to lesbians in Spanish slang.

13. The original quote reads as follows: "El matrimonio entre homosexuales es tratar de la misma manera lo que es diferente. Si se suman dos manzanas, pues dan dos manzanas. Y si se suman una manzana y una pera, nunca pueden dar dos manzanas, porque es que son componentes distintos. Hombre y mujer es una cosa, que es el matrimonio, y dos hombres o dos mujeres sera´n otra cosa distinta."

14. Things get more complicated as season 13 has just finished with the added problem that Esther's newborn daughter suffers from a terminal illness that can only be cured with a spinal cord transplant and, for compatibility reasons, she will need to have another baby with Rau´l and use the baby as a donor.

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