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Reflection and Reinforcement in Showtime's *Nurse Jackie*

Nurse Jackie is a show that details the professional and personal life of Jackie Peyton, a registered nurse in a New York hospital who struggles with an opioid addiction. The series was created by Liz Brixius, Evan Dunskey, Linda Wallem and started in 2009 and ran all the way to 2015. A plethora of people, the majority of whom are men, directed the series throughout its seven seasons. In this journal, I will examine the first season of *Nurse Jackie*'s subliminal and overt messages about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in how it both reflects and reinforces oppressive power structures within the United States' institutions.

Post #1: Season 1, Episode 1, "Pilot"; Jackie's Character

Normally, the pilot episodes of new television shows are tame. They tone everything down in order to get approval from the critics and the networks. However, *Nurse Jackie* takes everything it has and proceeds full-force with the premise of the series. Viewers are introduced to the myriad of characters that comprise the All Saints Hospital emergency room.

Jackie's character is introduced as somewhat dichotomous in this episode. She is presented as a leader among the nurses of the emergency room and has made her way to the top of ladder due to her seniority there. She is experienced and good at her job (though we find out later that her opioid addiction hinders her ability to perform her job at times.) However, she is

also presented as ethically questionable. Viewers find out later in the episode that Jackie is having a sexual affair with the hospital's pharmacist to help sustain a steady supply of opioid painkillers, even though she is married and has children. She is also seen crossing ethical lines in the name of "good." For example, she flushes a man's ear down the toilet after he nearly stabbed a woman to death (the woman had gotten his ear in self-defense) when she found out that he was not going to be arrested for his actions. Jackie also illegally changed somebody's driver's license to show that they were an organ donor, so somebody who needs a kidney or liver could get one. Despite some of her questionable actions, Jackie is presented as a sympathetic character in the series. Her shortcomings also make her less of a static character and one that is complex and rich, which many women characters are not written to be in the media. She is a character reserved for premium cable.

Post #2: Season 1, Episode 1, "Pilot"; Privilege in the Medical Institution

Nurse Jackie is a show about the medical institution, and I think it accurately portrays how gender and class privilege accurately plays out in our institutions and out in the real world. In the pilot episode, a bike messenger comes in after he has been in an accident and suffered some injuries. Jackie and Dr. Cooper are the ones supposed to be taking care of him. Jackie shows up in the hospital room promptly and professionally. She does her best to start the emergency care as soon as possible but is partially hindered due to Dr. Cooper's tardiness (Dr. Cooper is a man). When Dr. Cooper finally shows up, he is talking on his cellular phone. He takes his sweet time to finish his conversation before hanging up. While this is happening, Jackie is asking the patient to hold up two fingers because she infers that the patient has suffered a head

injury. The patient fails to do this and bleeds to death internally due to rapid swelling of his brain. Dr. Cooper was oblivious to what was happening from his lack of professionalism and has a patient die in his hands because of it. He does not receive any punishment while Jackie is stuck with the grunt work of telling the family. This shows a clear privilege dynamic between Jackie and Dr. Cooper. Women have to work twice as hard to get half the recognition that men get. In this case, Jackie was doing all of the work for a two-person job. Dr. Cooper neglected to do his part and a patient dies as a result. The man is let off because nobody questions him while the woman is stuck with the consequences. I also feel that there is a class dynamic at play here, too. Jackie, while probably makes enough money to live comfortably, will never make near the amount that Dr. Cooper will simply because she did not go to med school. This is even though her knowledge base is likely comparable to Dr. Cooper's due to her experience on the job. The man with a six-figure starting salary doesn't have to deal with repercussions because the people below him do.

Post #3: Season 1, Episode 5, "Daffodil"; People of Color as Extras

At this point in the series, there is no doubt that *Nurse Jackie* is a white television show. Most of the recurring characters in the first season are white. Only two out of the eleven recurring characters are people of color: Mohammed, the gay, Arab, Muslim nurse, and Gloria, the black hospital administrator. The majority of the patients that come into the All Saints Hospital emergency room are white, as well. This is not representative of the population of New York. When the show brings in people of color as background characters or patients, it sometimes relies on stereotypes to create and present these characters. For example, Zoey,

Jackie's student nurse who she is in charge of is put on front desk duty. There is a long line of patients waiting to talk to the other person at the front desk, but as soon as Zoey settles in, a Latina woman from the back of the line cuts in front of everybody else. She is not portrayed sympathetically. She has a bad demeanor and is using emergency room resources for a non-emergency. She came in for a pregnancy test. Jackie mentions that this is one of many pregnancy tests that the Latina woman has come in for in the past few months. The portrayal of this Latina woman perpetuates the stereotype that women of this race are "fiery;" That Latina women are overly sexual, hence her need for frequent pregnancy tests. It also perpetuates the stereotype that all Latinx people are in the United States to "take advantage of the system." The Latina woman in the episode says that she will only go to All Saints Hospital for her pregnancy tests because she can get them there for free, at the expense of the hospital. She would rather do that than go to the drug store and get one for fifteen dollars or one at a Planned Parenthood Clinic. This is a very racist representation of a woman of color that the writers chose to create. Considering that there are few people of color on the show, this only adds insult to injury.

Post #4: Season 1, Episode 5, "Daffodil"; Recurring Women of Color

As I mentioned in my last post, one of the two recurring people of color in the show is Gloria Akalitus. She is the hospital administrator of All Saints Hospital and a black woman. I do think it is refreshing to see one of the characters of color in the television series to be a person in power, somebody in a high-ranking position. Often times women of color are placed as background characters in low-power positions such as certified nursing assistants, janitors, or victims in the hospital setting. Gloria is in charge of making sure everything at the hospital runs

smoothly and partakes in other administrative tasks. She is a powerful woman of color. However, she is not portrayed as the most sympathetic character in the show. In fact, a new viewer of *Nurse Jackie* might think that she is a character who viewers are supposed to dislike due to her passionate, by-the-book attitude towards her job. She is a strict enforcer of rules (however one must do so to keep a hospital in operation), which often irritates Jackie and some of the other staff on the team. In fact, one of the doctors, Dr. O'Hara referred to her as a "wicked witch" in the pilot episode of the series and Jackie makes a point to avoid her in the hallways.

In the episode "Daffodil," Gloria stumbles upon a stun gun that a police officer or hospital security personnel presumably left on the floor. As one would expect, she was reasonably upset. A stun gun that somebody left on the floor of the hospital poses a substantial security risk or hospital liability if a child were to find it. However, her writing is overly dramatic. She writers have her express her grief in such a way that is distancing between her and the viewers of the show. It is almost like the writers do not want viewers and other characters of the show to like her. When Gloria does remove the stun gun off of the floor, she has to balance it with the other things she is wielding. When reached to push the button in the elevator, she accidentally shoots herself, but this accident seems to be designed for comic relief. The black woman accidentally shooting herself with a taser is supposed to be funny according to the people who wrote this episode. Perhaps because she is a black woman in power, she must be portrayed as a difficult boss to work with.

When I discovered *Nurse Jackie* on Netflix several years ago, I was instantly hooked. Despite the show's shortcomings that I have mentioned, it does transcend other television shows in one area: queer representation. Queer characters have made great strides since the mid-1990s. However, still to this day, queer representation in television and film is nowhere near perfect. *Nurse Jackie*, at least the first season of the series, defies this. It contains two recurring queer characters, both of whom are nurses: Thor, a gay white man, and Mohammed, a queer, Muslim, Arab man. I was mainly blown away by Mohammed, who is portrayed by Haaz Sleiman. Queer characters in pop culture are usually white, let alone middle-eastern. Also, characters seen in pop culture are rarely Muslim (he is one of a handful of characters I can recall), so to see this on a queer character is borderline revolutionary. This is especially so since he is not the only recurring queer character on the first season of the show.

However, I have noticed a recurring theme among television shows with multiple queer characters from the 2000s: they are all on premium cable. The first season of *Nurse Jackie*, *Queer as Folk*, and *The L Word*--all shows that have more than one queer characters--can all be found on Showtime, a cable channel that requires an expensive package. I can only think of one show on broadcast television during the same decade that had more than one regular queer character. If a viewer was queer, why did they have to opt for the most expensive cable package to see themselves represented? Perhaps it is because Showtime does not have advertisers like its broadcast counterparts, and advertisers do not want to have their products associated with characters who do not conform to heterosexist norms. Fortunately, *Nurse Jackie* and the other shows I mentioned are available on Netflix for streaming. However, access to the show was

restricted to those who had access to cable, usually those in the middle class, when the show came out in 2009.

Post #6: The Invisible Working Class

One thing that will always be true about hospitals is their need for staff members of all class levels: those of the working, middle, and upper-middle-class. In the first season of *Nurse Jackie*, only the latter two class levels live their lives on screen. In fact, they are the only two class levels that *Nurse Jackie* portrays. The nurses, who are able to make enough money to live comfortable lives, make up the middle class in the series; doctors and hospital administrators comprise the upper-middle-class. However, the working-class employees either never have names and lines, or are completely left out of the picture. In a paradoxical sense, this is simultaneously both an inaccurate and accurate depiction of the hospital workplace.

Viewing this as an inaccurate depiction of the medical institution takes a literal look at the diversity of class that makes the institution function. Working class employees are the backbone of the institution and just as valuable as their middle and upper-middle class counterparts. These employees take on the roles as certified nursing assistants, people who did not go to school as long as registered nurses such as Jackie or Mohammed but do similar tasks and some more grueling work. Janitors who help keep the hospital clean and sanitary also do not make any screen time in the first season of the series. Without these valuable workers, nothing would ever get done in All Saints Hospital.

In another sense, this is also an accurate view of inside the medical institution as the working class is out of the picture. Working class people always complete a disproportionate

chunk of the work that needs to be done, but often receive little, if any, credit. The doctors and nurses maintain glamor in the show similar to how they receive most of the credit in real life.

Post #7: Season 1, Episode 9, “Nose Bleed”; Treatment of the Poor

As mentioned in my previous post, I talked about *Nurse Jackie*’s ignorance of the working class in the medical institution. However, the stretch of classism extends to All Saints Hospital’s treatment of poor patients and pervasive ideologies that are perpetuated in the institution.

Mr. Everett, a homeless man who is a recurring patient of All Saints collapses in front of the hospital just before Jackie’s shift is about to start. Jackie immediately admits him to the hospital where she finds that he has gangrene on his foot. He will need an amputation. However, the gangrene on his foot could have been prevented from proper medical care, which he did not receive during his last visit to the hospital. In fact, despite the noticeable injury to his foot during his last visit, he was spat back out on the street, leading to the infection of the body part. The implication that can be drawn from this scenario is that the hospital kicked him out due to his lack of insurance and inability to pay for his medical care. Proper medical care is a sign of privilege in the United States. To get quality care, one must be able to afford it out of pocket or pay for expensive insurance premiums. This is reflected in *Nurse Jackie*.

Jackie tries to put the blame on Zoey, claiming if she had a doctor look at Mr. Everett’s foot the last time, this situation would have been avoided. However, Zoey was just following Jackie’s instruction that she gave her for when homeless people in need of emergency care come in: “greet them and street them” (“Nose Bleed”). Jackie believes in the ideology that the

homeless are sucking up all of the resources, so she instills that value onto her trainee and makes an effort to get the homeless out of the hospital as quickly as possible. Medical care is reserved for those who can afford it.

Post #8: Season 1, Episode 7, “Steak Knife”; Mental Illness

Overlooking the All Saints Hospital emergency room lies an apartment complex. A mentally ill man who is referred to as God lives there. *Nurse Jackie* does depict mental illness, which I applaud. However, the depictions are frequently contradictory in how the show wants to depict people with mental illness. God shouts from so many stories high at the people walking along the Manhattan street below him. He is seen as a general nuisance in the neighborhood. Many of the things that come out of his mouth are obscene and misogynistic. People he harasses include the nurses of All Saints Hospital.

God is not portrayed in the most positive light, but he is not the only character who is mentally ill in the series. Jackie’s daughter, Grace, has severe anxiety. She also receives much more screen time as God only appears in a handful of episodes including “Steak Knife.” He only shows up once a season at the most. Grace appears much more frequently as a recurring character. I also must say that *Nurse Jackie* captures generalized anxiety disorder very well. While Grace’s character is static as much of her development within the first season revolves around her developing illness, she is not portrayed as weak. She is not seen as a problem that her parents have to deal with. Her anxiety disorder is presented as something that is just a part of life, like all mental illness. Her parents, Jackie and Kevin do their best to help her anxiety while trying to keep her off of addictive benzodiazepines.

While God, like Grace, is not the best representation of mental illness on television, he is still miles ahead of the status quo. Many mentally ill people are depicted horribly as serial killers, stalkers, and other violent criminals. Grace and God do not fit this mold.

Post #9: Sexual Harassment

One of the ongoing tensions in the first season of *Nurse Jackie* is that between Jackie and Dr. Cooper. Jackie is smart, experienced, and professional when excluding her poor ethics. Dr. Cooper is smart but does not know how to access it, he is unprofessional, showing up late to meet patients, and misses frequent pager memorandums. Jackie is often left to make executive decisions by herself because of Dr. Cooper's lack of professionalism. This creates leeway for drama-filled confrontations between the two. However, in the pilot episode of the series, the two are having an argument in the pharmacy and Dr. Cooper grabs Jackie's breast. He claims that it is an involuntary, Tourette's like response to stress. The trope of Dr. Cooper grabbing women's breasts is present throughout the rest of the season and series.

There are two problems with Cooper's response. One of them lies in the writing of the show: this Tourette's like the response is, in my opinion, designed to be some form of comic relief. Dr. Cooper could have been written to have any type of tick in these situations but the writers chose to have him grope people's breasts. This is extremely offensive. It is a form of sexual harassment, a hostile work environment, being minimized into a cheap joke. It also normalizes sexual harassment in the workplace as no one in the first season of the show or even the whole series for that matter questions Dr. Cooper's tick. It tells the women who are being forced to work in a hostile work environment situation that what they are going through is

nothing more than a joke. It reinforces the status quo in the workplace that keeps men in power over women via quid pro quo. It creates a reason to minimize sexual harassment cases, to claim that such grievances are absurd.

The other problem with this tick is that it shows that Dr. Cooper is made uncomfortable by strong women. Throughout the first season, the only breasts he grabs are those of women--strong women like Jackie and Dr. O'Hara. He is never made uncomfortable by other men. This is perhaps a reflection of society's views toward strong women. Strong women pose a threat to the patriarchy, and thus men's privilege. Perhaps Dr. Cooper's tick makes a joke out of the strong women on this show.

Post #10: Bury Your Queers

One of the things that I praise *Nurse Jackie* for is its superior inclusion of queer characters for a television show created in the 2000s. Not only that, the character in question is a person of color and Muslim, too. Unfortunately, Mohammed only was a part of the first season of *Nurse Jackie*. This leads me to a broader issue in popular culture: the trope of getting rid of queer characters. This has been seen throughout television for a while--queer characters who appear on a television show or a movie vanish into thin air. Whether this is by means of death, the character moving on to different things from the central narrative, or professional drama in the studio, queer characters are frequently written off the script. Unfortunately, Mohammed did not make the second season due to the writers wanting Dr. O'Hara to be Jackie's best friend as opposed to Mohammed (Bryant). The creators felt that Mohammed's presence in the show would be redundant. However, writers and creators of the television could have easily rewritten

the show to where Mohammed is Jackie's best friend. If they did not want to do that, they could have worked into the show some other way. Writing Mohammed off was the unnecessary thing to do. However, the writers chose to kick him off of the cast list completely, perpetuating the trope of burying queer characters.

However, *Nurse Jackie* does still have one queer, recurring character after Mohammed's departure from the show. Granted, this equates to one less recurring character of color having a media presence. It also leaves only one queer recurring character on the show as opposed to two. This is still much better than the representation that many shows in the past few years provide for the queer community. Despite this failure of epic proportions, *Nurse Jackie* provides a much better representation of queer people than many other shows out there.

Overall, *Nurse Jackie* does reflect and perpetuate oppression even though it has made a few positive strides in its first season. It's use of making Jackie an extremely complex female character that is portrayed sympathetically and two recurring queer characters, one of which who is Muslim and a person of color, does make small nudges at the status quo. However, I feel that these steps are canceled out by other, more frequent classist and racist messages and the fact that this show was only able to be viewed on expensive, premium cable during its debut.

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