

“Working Through” as Ideological Intervention: The Case of Homophobia in *Rescue Me*

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Abstract

This article considers the ideological significance of homophobic discourse as part of a sophisticated interrogation of homophobic outlooks in the FX series *Rescue Me*. It posits that a variety of narrative features enable a strategy of “working through” in which characters’ frank conversations and evolving perspectives depict the process of experiencing ideological challenge. Working through emphasizes the need for scholars to fully explore the internally contradictory narratives that are characteristic of the increasing complexity of some television storytelling and defies norms of critical media analysis that argue particular media texts either reinforce or resist dominant ideology. Cogent examination of other instances of working through could reinvigorate stymied intellectual spaces by insisting that scholars consider characters’ process of struggle with ideological perspectives throughout the unfolding of a series.

Keywords

television, gay, *Rescue Me*, homophobia, working through

The FX television series *Rescue Me* (2004–2011) chronicles the post-9/11 lives of a fictional crew of New York City firefighters as they save lives, grieve the deaths of colleagues and loved ones, and negotiate their troubled personal relationships. Though the show primarily centers on the work and home life of Tommy Gavin (Denis Leary), its depiction of the brotherhood of Ladder Company 62 also offers considerable examination of the lives of Chief Jerry Reilly, Lieutenant Kenneth “Lieu” Shea, Franco

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Rivera, Sean Garrity, and probationary firefighter Mike Silletti. Throughout the show's seven seasons, these men form bonds that grow not only through their experiences together on the job but also, in a perhaps more significant way, through the frank conversations that occur within the straight homosocial space of the firehouse. Indeed, much of *Rescue Me* revolves around the men fraternizing in ways that seemingly suggest a straightforward backlash against the increasing visibility and social acceptance of gay men in the early twenty-first century.

In the series' second episode, "Gay" (102, July 28, 2004), for instance, the crew is en route to the scene of an accident when Sean asks the Chief if he read a recent front-page news story about a retired firefighter who came out as gay. "He says there's a secret society within the brotherhood of the FDNY," Sean says, explaining that the veteran, Bobby Teff, claims to know that twenty of the firefighters who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks were closeted gay men. This prompts a discussion among the men in the truck about, as Lieu asks, how someone can "prove" which men were gay. "You know how you prove it?" Tommy jokingly answers. "You look at a poster of the 343 [firefighters who died in the terrorist attacks] and pick out the twenty best-looking guys. Those are the ones the fags are gonna claim were gay." Though the conversation is put on hold as they arrive on the accident scene, the Chief raises it again later at the firehouse: "Somebody ought to tell this faggot what's what," he says of Teff after reading the article. "I'm on the job twenty years and I've never seen one guy that's a faggot, and all of a sudden they tell me twenty guys are taking it right up the ass?"

We offer these brief interactions to illustrate the uncensored baldness of the speech about gay men that is common to the series—and, increasingly, in contemporary popular media culture more broadly.¹ Yet such homophobic language does not indicate the totality of *Rescue Me*'s engagement with the politics of gay identity. Unlike the purely comedic and non-narrative media sites that predominantly utilize this discourse, such as television's *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007-2010) and *Tosh.0* (2009-), the series features an uncommon hybrid narrative that juxtaposes this flippant rhetoric with evolving, nonheroic characters, contradictory worldviews, and storylines following characters through self-interrogation. We contend that *Rescue Me*'s presentation of gay identity and politics through these many facets of narrative requires that analysts dig past the obvious intolerance of dialogue that suggests a regressive ideology and consider the ideological contribution of depicting the characters' struggles with social change toward gay acceptance.

This article argues that such a depiction is characteristic of a distinct ideological intervention that we term "working through." We invoke working through to name a textual process, not an interpretive position of audiences nor an intentional effort by creators, that involves the depiction of ideological struggle at a narrative level; it thus requires that scholars concentrate as much on the ways in which characters grapple with ideas throughout the *unfolding* of a series as on the narrative conclusion. In our use, working through is a component of the narrative that allows for contradiction and instability with regard to an aspect of ideology that is conceivably being "worked through." In the case of *Rescue Me*, the series works through attitudes toward gay

people by using characters with nonstatic outlooks and by depicting their process of negotiating homophobia and concern regarding gay detection, although we can certainly imagine that other cases might feature alternative techniques to illustrate the process of working through any number of contested perspectives.

We contend that working through is an ideological strategy capable of meaningful political work, and thus is a valuable addition to textual analysts' arsenal. Texts that evince working through offer narrative illustrations of the process of change and thus confound ideological analysis that ultimately argues a text either reinforces or resists dominant perspectives, calling for sophisticated analysis appropriate for making sense of similarly complicated narratives as those featured in *Rescue Me*. Our conceptualization of working through as neither categorically indicative of backlash nor of progress enables wide-ranging applicability; its ultimate valence must be determined through analysis of the individual case. Our contribution here, then, is twofold: we offer a preliminary theorization of working through as an ideological strategy within a narrative and we provide the case analysis of *Rescue Me* and its discourse regarding gay identity to illustrate how examination of working through might reinvigorate ideological analysis stymied by the contradictory evidence offered by many texts.

Contextualizing “Working Through” and *Rescue Me*

In proposing working through as an ideological strategy that enables productive analysis of media texts such as *Rescue Me*, we acknowledge that neither the idea that negotiation exists as part of the meaning making of cultural texts nor the term “working through” is new to critical media studies. However, our use of these concepts relies on a subtle but significant variation from previous literatures. Hall (1980, 137) arguably offers the most famous use of negotiation in his proposition that most audience readings are “negotiated” and fall somewhere between poles of “dominant” and “oppositional.” Whereas that case of negotiation is one of audience practice or behavior, we propose working through as a *character's* practice and one contained to the text. Similarly, television and cultural studies scholars D'Acci (1994), Becker (2006, 2009), and Levine (2007), among others, use the term in reference to “negotiation” that occurs throughout the circuit of production, reception, and sociohistorical context. This may be a broader, subsequent step for this study, but here we confine ourselves to an examination of the series' depiction of characters' confrontation of changing social beliefs, as made possible by *Rescue Me's* uncommon narrative priority on character study and development.

“Working through” also appears in the media studies literature, referring to conceptualization of the audience's working through of material via psychoanalytic theories. Ellis (1999, 55) provides some basis for this understanding of television's ideological apparatuses in his examination of how television—writ large—“can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the raw data of news reality into more narrativized, explained forms,” which he connects with the use of “working-through” in psychoanalysis as “a process whereby material is not so much processed into a finished product as

continually worried over until it is exhausted.” The uses of working through that Ellis and we pose are complementary although somewhat differently focused: his theory conceives of television’s ideological process more broadly and focuses on how news and the cumulative telling of news items through more issue-based cases may function for audiences, while we attend to how narratives depict *characters* working through contested belief structures. Although he does step beyond his focus on discrete news events to briefly consider working through in “dramatic narratives,” here too he primarily points out that their serial nature may enable *audiences* to “experience dilemmas from the inside” by watching wide-ranging storylines about a multiplicity of characters (Ellis 2000, 122). Ellis also distinguishes the hybrid narrative structure and strategies of *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), and *ER* (1994-2009) from the static characters in episodic narratives common in earlier eras, a distinction that we would argue *Rescue Me* furthers through its use of nonheroic protagonists and ambivalent moral universe, but here too, he is proposing how these different narrative forms have varied consequences for a theorized audience experience (Ellis 2000, 124).

Ellis’s work is closely related to Newcomb and Hirsch’s (1983) conceptualization of television as providing a “cultural forum” through which texts discuss and negotiate a variety of ideas. Our use considers television’s cultural forum in light of characters who evolve more considerably, or whose process of negotiating and challenging dominant ideologies is more central to the storytelling than those available to Newcomb and Hirsch in the early 1980s. Working through is also related to Lotz’s (2004) effort to update the cultural forum to a post-network context, wherein she discusses the ability of television to create a fictional environment for examining contemporary issues. But Lotz considers how series fictionalized post-9/11 cultural debates such as the racial profiling of Muslims or imprisonment policies toward those perceived as enemy combatants in particular “special” episodes, whereas *Rescue Me* works through cultural debates using serial characterization.

Rescue Me as Complex, Post-Network, Post-Closet Television

“Working through” can be identified in texts that attend to the contested nature of ideological positions, often through the depiction of nonidealized, nonstatic characters that struggle to reconcile their outlooks with those of their community. We argue that series employing this strategy utilize representational techniques and narrative tools such as serialized storytelling, emphasis on character development and melodramatic range over plot action, narrative realism, complex and often morally questionable characters, and hybridized genre conventions that were less common in previous industrial contexts and reflect an emerging and distinctive subset of contemporary television production that Lotz (2007) describes as characteristic of the “post-network era” and Mittell (2011) discusses as “complex television”. Lotz contends that shifts in the competitive landscape of television since the mid-1980s have led to changing narrative attributes in programming including the greater narrative complexity Mittell

(2011) identifies in experimentation with “narrative pacing, selectivity, perspective, and chronology.” By depicting characters working through contentious aspects of culture, series can reflect on the often hidden *process* of ideological challenge and change. In terms of the case here, we posit that *Rescue Me*’s political work can be best understood as an endeavor of depicting the characters negotiating adjustments in dominant ideology regarding gay identity and that although it portrays the experience of those whose past privilege is under siege and whose worldviews are rendered increasingly obsolete, it does not necessarily present this change as a loss.

Rescue Me is one of a group of series including *Breaking Bad* (2008-), *The Shield* (2002-2008), and *Men of a Certain Age* (2009-2011) that debuted in the early twenty-first century and constructed stories about multifaceted, often flawed, characters that changed over the course of the series. It primarily endeavors to tell engaging interpersonal stories about the lives of a team of firefighters who are racked in various ways by the trauma of loss, survivor guilt, and post-9/11 nihilism. Unlike the moral universe common to mass audience entertainment, virtue is not always rewarded in the series as obviously failed and damaged men engage in all manner of cruelty and self-destruction, yet go on to live another day—albeit ambivalently—while children die in fires clutching pets that survive, are mowed down by drunk drivers, or succumb to illness. In a likely deliberate irony given the depicted occupational heroism of the firefighters’ work, *Rescue Me* not only lacks a reliable moral center but also is altogether absent characters that consistently even aspire to behave heroically in their personal lives.² The series thus does not offer its protagonists as heroes but rather dwells on and interrogates their flaws, one of which is homophobia. But while the series is marked by the intolerant language described in this article’s first paragraphs, it also thoughtfully explores the Chief’s struggle to accept his gay son as well as chronicles a young firefighter’s gradual recognition of his own bisexual identity and the crew’s subsequent efforts to accept that firefighter as a member of the brotherhood despite seeing him as gay—plot arcs that suggest sustained negotiation with, not simply backlash against, sexual difference.

The characters of series such as *Rescue Me* have antecedents in shows including *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999), and even *All in the Family* (1971-1979), in which the outlook of a central character is repeatedly challenged and that depict his—as they are all men—gradual process of negotiating changing cultural norms. Of the characters featured in these shows, the evolution of Andy Sipowicz in *NYPD Blue* is likely most similar to what we discuss occurring in *Rescue Me*. However, *Rescue Me* is distinguished by its sustained focus on character with much less frequent engagement with the occupational duties foreground in *NYPD Blue*—and in series such as *Hill Street Blues* or *Homicide: Life on the Street*—and by its multi-protagonist structure that allows stories about how different men struggle through the same issues both separately and together. Moreover, Sipowicz’s story is clearly one of the reformation of a character who first appears as a racist and drunk—recalling a character such as Archie Bunker—whereas *Rescue Me* operates within a much more ambivalent moral universe without a clear agenda toward reform.

We do not contend that *Rescue Me* is wholly novel with regard to its depiction of a flawed central character changing over time, but that it is a particularly rich site of analysis and is characteristic of an emerging type of storytelling that requires reconsideration of the primary tools and assumptions of ideological television analysis.

Much of the possibility for this depiction of working through, then, likely results from textual qualities and narrative strategies somewhat specifically available to television and uncommonly utilized in this series. As Ellis (1999, 67) identifies, television narratives have what he terms a “contingent and co-present” quality that results from the reality that their ultimate duration is unknown when television narratives begin; in contrast, cinematic and novelistic forms are “constructed retrospectively” and know their ending in advance. Additionally, television allows the opportunity for long-form narrative construction that enables character development in a manner available to few other narrative forms.

We argue that *Rescue Me*'s working through of homophobia is especially profound given its depiction in a decade marked by widespread gay visibility on television. Long unrepresented or stereotypically portrayed as either victims or villains when they appeared at all, gay characters have become more diverse and far more prevalent in a number of genres since the late twentieth century (Gross 2001). They have become so pervasive, in fact, that Becker (2009, 127) has categorized the contemporary era of television as “post-closet” to describe how the ubiquity of openly gay men has led to “the illusion of a post-closet world where all men who are gay are out.” As a result, he argues that the gay men who are not out “must be helped out” of the closet to maintain confidence in the clarity of gay/straight distinction through analyses of stories featured in *Hack* (2002-2004) and *Law & Order: SVU* (1999-). *Rescue Me*'s exceptional focus on homosexuality in its early seasons, particularly for a show lacking gay characters, speaks to the need for nuanced analysis in the post-closet era and consideration of emergent tropes such as pathologizing those who remain in the closet. Along this line, *Rescue Me* presents gay-themed storylines that reveal an almost relentless preoccupation with knowing and detecting gay identity in nearly every episode of its first season and in many episodes thereafter. This ongoing preoccupation distinguishes it from other series that have intermittently tackled a wide range of issues regarding gay and, to a much lesser extent, bisexual identity in narrative arcs that rarely extend beyond a few episodes.³

As explored in our analysis below, we contend that the narrative possibilities of post-network television allowed *Rescue Me* to present a more nuanced treatment of the negotiations and politics involved in television's “post-closet” era than in the single-episode storylines that Becker insightfully discusses. Whereas those plots quickly concluded in ways that allowed for concise ideological assessments about the show's depictions and discourses of homosexuality, *Rescue Me*'s often contradictory, seasons-long portrayal of the firefighters' attempts to “know” gay identity and to come to grips with the new visibility and social acceptance of gay people complicates such analysis. Moreover, in proposing working through, we, like Becker, are attempting to develop theoretical concepts useful for examining processes of ideological change.

Becker uses “post-closet” to think beyond arguments that the contemporary era of television either reinforces or subverts heteronormativity, which is helpful in an era so full of contradictions—such as more freely accepting gay people while punishing them if they are not “out”—that it resists such analytic reductions. Though his characterization of “post-closet” is broader than one series, we see working through in this case as shedding light on the complexity of the ongoing, difficult, and contentious redefinition of male gender and sexual identity politics at a sociohistorical moment when gay men are becoming increasingly accepted by society.

How *Rescue Me* Works through Homophobia

To discuss how *Rescue Me* works through issues of gay identity, we focus our analysis on the first three seasons (thirty-nine episodes) of the program. Although negotiations with gay-related issues recur throughout the series, focusing on these three seasons allows us to closely attend to the complexity, ambivalence, and ambiguity on offer as nearly every episode of the first season revolves to some extent around gay-themed storylines, several of which extend into the second and third seasons. In doing so, we illustrate how a multiplicity of characters engage in a range of discourses about gay identity, from crass banter between the firefighters to serious discussions concerning their personal lives, and examine how their homophobia functions in these contexts. Moreover, we trace two extended processes of working through, specifically those of Chief Jerry Reilly (Jack McGee) and probationary firefighter Mike Silletti (Michael Lombardi), as these characters’ seasons-long engagements with gay and bisexual issues feature prominently in *Rescue Me* and best illustrate the slow and ongoing negotiations that we see as constituting this ideological strategy.

Whereas television has moved toward greater inclusion of gay characters and presentation of worlds that eschew homophobia (Becker 2006), *Rescue Me* is a striking exception to the trend. In the second episode—described in the introduction—in which the crew reacts with confusion and hostility to Bobby Teff’s claim about the closeted 9/11 firefighters, the show launches an assault on gay men that is both symbolic with the crew’s inflammatory language, and literal with a physical attack on Teff by the Chief later in the episode. The Chief is so angered by Teff, who he says is disrespecting the deceased firemen’s families, that he tracks him down at a gay bar and injures him badly enough to necessitate that he be put into a medically induced coma. Both the virulence of the Chief’s actions and his crew’s unreceptive reactions to Teff are in fact positioned by the show as a response to this new acceptance in and beyond the media: “What is it with these gay people? They’re everywhere now,” Tommy Gavin complains in the same episode. Significantly, the show rarely offers actual representations of gay men, yet the “specter” of homosexuality hovers over the first seasons as the firemen repeatedly confront how this gay visibility challenges their ingrained ideas about homosexuality and unsettles the dynamics of their camaraderie on the job. As illustrated by the men’s reactions to news of a gay “secret society” in the FDNY, these shifts are a source of deep anxiety and discomfort. Clearly the Chief is upset not only

because he feels Teff disrespected the deceased firemen's families but also because his revelation threatens the bonds—trust, friendship, respect—that give the crew cohesion. Teff's announcement in effect disrupted the men's expectations of the brotherhood as a heterosexual space as well as their assumption that they know homosexuality when they see it.

Though one might assume that such comments and behaviors function to endorse homophobia, we argue *Rescue Me* uses them to more meaningfully depict the men's struggle to adapt to the changes this gay visibility brings to their lives. For instance, the series depicts the more senior characters of the firehouse negotiating changing masculinities through their interactions with the firefighters of a younger generation, who explain—often to the bewilderment and disgust of the senior characters—such aspects of contemporary masculinity and culture as what it means to be metrosexual and the social value in having gay friends (see episodes 102, July 28, 2004; and 209, August 16, 2005). Because characters' outlooks are not static, the series illustrates how challenge and evolution can happen, although notably does so while using homophobic language and, at times, homophobic outlooks and behaviors and without a clearly reformist agenda. To be clear, we do not argue that *Rescue Me*'s inflammatory discourse always or even generally abandons derogatory intent; instead, we insist that the ways in which this language operates in the series' ongoing narratives allow it to function far more complexly than indicated on its face.

This complexity is particularly notable with the characters' attempts to make sexuality knowable: despite feeling like gay people are suddenly "everywhere," time and again the men realize they do not know what it means to be gay or how to recognize it. In the second episode alone, Lieu (John Scurti) asks twice how Teff knows the deceased firefighters were gay ("Was there some kind of secret handshake?") while Mike and Sean Garrity (Steven Pasquale) consider whether Teff simply mistook metrosexual firefighters as gay. Franco Rivera (Daniel Sunjata) wonders, given statistics that he read about the frequency of homosexuality in the population, if someone in the crew could be gay. Outside the firehouse, Tommy contemplates what a same-sex marriage looks like, worries his cousin's widow has become a lesbian, and asks whether gay men sometimes take "a breather" from men to date women. These instances reveal the very nature of homosexuality to be in question for the men as they realize the line between gay and straight identities is not as clear-cut as they assumed. Despite frequently engaging in homophobic banter that is based on the notion that male homosexuality is little more than excessive displays of femininity, it turns out that identifying gayness is surprisingly difficult for the crew. In subsequent episodes, the men question each other's sexualities, question their *own* sexualities, and get mistaken for gay in a series of storylines that reveal a confusion about homosexuality—and, by extension, heterosexuality—that belies the certitude that they construct with their language.

In *Rescue Me*, then, the use of homophobic discourse does not signal a static retrenchment into an era disapproving of gay people, but rather functions as part of an evolving attempt to make sense of large-scale transformations that are rendering obsolete these men's attitudes and ideas about homosexuality. In this way, the men's use

of this language—particularly to police the boundaries of appropriate masculinity through casual banter that mocks men they deem “faggy”—might be usefully characterized as a means to resolve straight panic. Becker (2006, 23), drawing on Sedgwick’s (1990) notion of homosexual panic, describes straight panic as “what happens when heterosexual men and women, still insecure about the boundary between gay and straight, confront an increasingly accepted homosexuality.” Throughout *Rescue Me*’s early seasons we see intolerant language used for comedic and dramatic effect as well as a coping mechanism and a means for the men to reestablish homo/heterosexual definition at a moment when they are forced to confront a world that not only confuses their notions of sexuality but also pushes them to embrace gay people. This language provides the men with a sense of control as they are told that their intolerant behavior is socially unacceptable and that they must change to accommodate, as the Chief puts it, “politically correct bullshit” (101, July 21, 2004). Their insistence on homophobic discourse thus figures prominently in the men’s attempts to reconcile their own beliefs with larger ideological shifts—a process that, as we now illustrate through discussion of the working through experiences of the Chief and Mike, is anything but seamless and linear.

The storyline of the Chief, as the oldest member of the crew, perhaps most starkly depicts the experience of having to make sense of social transformations that effectively render one’s belief system outdated. Following his aforementioned assault on Teff, the Chief faces severe repercussions in the workplace yet has no remorse for his behavior. In fact, he expresses dismay that, after 22 years of service, he might have to leave the force because he fought “one gay shithead” (105, August 18, 2004). Later, in the same episode, when his lawyer and Tommy suggest that he ask a gay person to provide a character witness at the impending trial, he responds, “I don’t know any fags, end of discussion.” However, confronted with the possibility of losing his job, the Chief eventually calls his only son, Peter—who, viewers and the crew learn, is a gay firefighter in Boston. Though Peter helps acquit him by lying during his testimony and saying that his dad is not homophobic, the Chief expresses little gratitude and, embarrassed that his crew now knows he has a gay son, refuses to introduce him to the firefighters. The four-episode plotline concludes with the Chief and his crew celebrating his victory over drinks as they joke about engaged gay men registering for wedding gifts at shops that sell women’s clothing, lingerie, and sex toys—a scene that illustrates how homophobic language still functions to strengthen the firefighters’ bonds despite its social inappropriateness. More importantly, it also shows how *Rescue Me* does not offer redemptive narratives in which characters quickly learn to overcome their prejudices. Though the Chief nearly loses his job because of his homophobic actions, the incident does not teach him or his crew to accept gay men.

Still the Chief’s—and his crew’s—attitudes about gay people do not remain as one-dimensional as this particular storyline suggests. Though the Chief’s homophobia largely remains intact throughout the series, *Rescue Me* depicts with frankness his reluctant attempts to accept—or, at the very least, tolerate—and understand his son and to deal with the realization that his own prejudice prevents him from fully loving

and knowing him. His evolving attitudes regarding Peter's homosexuality feature no great moments of epiphany, are frequently contradictory, and are measured in only the slightest adjustments. For instance, while the Chief continues to engage in homophobic banter with the crew, he makes it clear that jokes about his son are off limits—a gesture at odds with the disgust that permeates the Chief's own comments to Peter. In season two, however, viewers see the toll that the Chief's intolerance takes on him: when his wife throws a birthday party for Peter's partner, the Chief demands that his crew attend the “full-blown fag fest” even as his own revulsion and fear stop him from partaking in the festivities (208, August 9, 2005). He stubbornly stays in the yard before retreating to the basement, alone, to cry as he looks at mementos of his son's youth—an illustration of a character born in old norms who struggles to reunderstand a world changing around him and to deal with the personal effects of his homophobia. The hatefulness that superficially marked the Chief as a stereotypical homophobe in the early episodes thus takes on deeper resonance as the series progresses, shedding light on why he reacted so violently to Teff and highlighting the difficulties often involved in undoing lifelong prejudice.

A similar working through is depicted by Mike, the young probationary firefighter who comes to terms with his own evolving sexual identity and, in doing so, forces his colleagues to confront their own feelings about his sexuality as well. Of all the men in the firehouse, Mike embodies a masculinity that is the least defined by hegemonic gender norms—he frequently articulates his emotions, seems uninterested in proving his manhood to the crew, and dates women that the other men consider unattractive or emasculating. As a result, the crew frequently ridicules his masculinity: when Mike explains that he likes taller women because sometimes “it's nice not to have to be the man,” for instance, Franco replies, “Only you could turn a relationship with a woman into a gay experience” (205, July 19, 2005). Even so, the men accept Mike as one of their own and he regularly engages in their banter, laughing at their homophobic comments and even telling the Chief that gay people “kind of scare” him (208, August 9, 2005). Yet unlike the Chief, whose homophobia is more ingrained and who thus struggles more intensely with it, Mike soon learns to befriend gay men, first in order to attract women who might find his open-mindedness appealing and then simply because he likes their company. Eventually, he is surprised to find himself engaging in same-sex relations with his roommate before coming to the conclusion that he is bisexual. The realization comes at the end of a deeply conflicted working-through of his sexual confusion and internalized homophobia: throughout season three he oscillates between trying to embrace his sexual fluidity and trying to convince himself that he is heterosexual, lashing out at his roommate with homophobic epithets and sleeping with women in an attempt to prove he is not sexually attracted to men.

Once Mike finally comes to terms with his sexuality, however, the crew then attempts to work through its own thoughts about the situation. As with Teff's claim of a “secret society” of gay firefighters amid the FDNY, the news of Mike's bisexuality challenges the men's assumptions about the nature of the bonds between them. Indeed, for three seasons those bonds had been strengthened by considerable homophobic banter—the sort of dialogue that Sedgwick (1990, 186) argues works to demarcate

gay/straight boundaries by protecting homosocial male relations such as “male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination, and heterosexual rivalry” from homosexual desire. The evolution of Mike’s sexual identity, then, forces the men of Ladder Company 62 to decide whether they feel his bisexuality undermines their bonds. Though the men initially react with disgust, with Franco demanding that Mike shower separately and Sean insisting that he not discuss his same-sex interests, Tommy rallies in his defense. “Now whether Mike’s a fag—sorry, Mike—or not, you know, he’s a part of [our] family,” he says, going on to argue that even if Mike “acts a little faggy from time to time” he is still a valuable member of the team (309, August 1, 2006). Though the men refuse to temper their homophobic language around Mike, their eventual decision to embrace him—because he has proven himself to be a skilled firefighter but also, notably, because of their years-long friendships with him—reflects a considerable shift in how they react to perceived homoeroticism in their ranks. In the previous season, these same men unanimously pushed a new firefighter out of the crew once they discovered he liked to dress in women’s clothing and wear wigs at sex clubs.

In the cases of both of these characters, and throughout *Rescue Me*, we argue that offensive discourse does not hold up homophobia as a preferred worldview nor expose intolerant characters as wrong so they may be subsequently reformed. While characters certainly come to terms with aspects of their homophobia, such as Mike’s eventual self-acceptance and the crew’s refusal to see his bisexuality as a threat to the unit’s camaraderie, their transformations remain incomplete. The Chief, for instance, never comes to fully accept gay people although he eventually makes peace with his son and even supports him at his commitment ceremony (403, June 27, 2007). The Chief’s trajectory highlights the complicated and multifaceted ways in which homophobia functions in the show: in some instances, his homophobia ultimately goes unpunished—he did not, for instance, lose his job after his assault on Teff in season one—yet throughout the first three seasons, viewers also see the huge emotional toll that his disgust with and intolerance of gay people takes on his personal life and how he struggles with it, and this likely plays a role in his decision to take his own life after being forced into a desk job by health problems. What we find important about working through as an ideological strategy in *Rescue Me* is not the outcome but rather the depiction of these men’s everyday, on-the-ground negotiations with ideological transformation—*how* they work through the transition, not whether they ultimately adopt a more gay-accepting outlook. The show does not present these experiences of people in transition as simple morality plays, but as long, complicated, and often contradictory struggles that deserve and demand to be analyzed as such.

Why Read *Rescue Me* as Working Through

As depictions and discourses of gay identity have increasingly appeared on television since the early 1990s, scholars have convincingly argued that this new visibility has often reinforced, rather than undermined, heteronormativity (e.g., Dow 2001; Shugart 2003; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006). Although this type of work continues to

produce a number of illuminating insights into how gay representations circulate within and beyond television, we assert that the queer media studies field has been somewhat limited by the sheer pervasiveness of arguments that insist particular representations and texts are ultimately either progressive (e.g., Hart 2004) or retrograde (e.g., Avila-Saavedra 2009; Hart 1999). Moreover, we believe this conclusive approach is an ineffective means for making sense of certain programming characteristic of the post-network era. Whereas scholars such as Becker (2006), Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002), and Pullen (2004) have shown how industry logics and the established conventions of specific genres have circumscribed representational possibilities, we believe that shifting industrial conditions and genre conventions in the 2000s have resulted in series such as *Rescue Me* that defy either/or ideological assessments by adopting new hybrid narratives, storytelling techniques, and modes of characterization that can be best understood as working through.

Our call to read *Rescue Me* in terms of working through emphasizes the need for media scholars—not just scholars studying representations and discourses of gayness—to fully explore the internally contradictory narratives characteristic of the increasing complexity of some television storytelling. Examined cogently, working through might enable scholars to reinvigorate stymied intellectual spaces such as the one Brunsdon (2005) critiques in feminist media analysis as the “Ur feminist” article that alternates between rote acknowledgement of reassertion of the dominant ideology as well as opportunities for resistant readings. Critical media studies has amassed an expansive scholarship that constructs persuasive analyses of how popular media texts either reproduce or resist dominant ideology. But as contemporary television studies’ objects of analysis have multiplied and become targeted to niche audiences, new concepts such as working through may be needed to understand their more complicated modes of storytelling and the ideological processes allowed.

Developments in the post-network era have made possible more complex storytelling that can depict the struggles involved in large-scale ideological shifts such as the transition toward a more gay-accepting society in a manner that allows for deeper, direct engagement with the slow process of ideological challenge by showing how a person might change his or her homophobic outlook without the artificiality of the “very special episode.” Although such contained, episode-length treatments of social issues often end well—the bigot is reformed—and might offer audiences food for thought, they provide little acknowledgement that deeply held beliefs are not reversed in an hour of narrative time. We contend that exploring the dynamics involved in how particular characters work through this process over time—what must be worked through, for whom, how, to what ends, and why at a specific cultural moment?—pushes scholars to acknowledge, and to more adequately assess, textual contradictions.

While we propose using working through in this manner as a new textual strategy that is available for television criticism, we nonetheless acknowledge that limitations exist to how it may function in media studies. Whereas it may be productive in thinking about how particular texts process political issues, as offered here, the need for more work exploring production and reception is evident. For instance, institutional

research could yield information about creator intent and begin to make arguments about broader processes of negotiation within the circuit of cultural production as offered by D'Acci (1994) and others. Interviews with producers and observations of the production process—negotiations between writers, for instance—could illuminate why particular sites, such as gay identity, were deemed suitable or necessary for characters' negotiation. Audience research likewise poses another necessary line of inquiry. Research of audiences meaning making of ideological content has often focused on discrete viewing contexts and has not attended to how viewers make sense of characters that change over time. Moreover, working through raises challenges related to the differences in the perceptions of fans that make sure to view regularly and for whom the intricacies of character development are evident as opposed to that of the majority of viewers who view even favorite series irregularly. Only reception-based queries about working through can reveal how much, if any, ideological work might be accomplished for viewers.

By no means do we contend that working through will inspire a field-changing shift in the conduct of textual analyses. Its availability may remain only occasional, as we have argued that working through is somewhat specific to particular textual qualities and narrative strategies of serialized television in the post-network era. Further, its value may be diminished in the minds of some by our insistence that texts exhibiting working through are not consistent illustrations of resistance to or reassertions of dominant ideology. Yet analysis of textual strategies that are only utilized on occasion may nonetheless advance our thinking and inspire new techniques for understanding how ideologies might work in media texts that are growing increasingly sophisticated thanks to shifting industrial contexts. So although working through may not be available for examination of all media forms, we have aimed to illustrate why changes in television narratives demand that scholars consider new approaches to conducting ideological analysis that do not necessarily rely on either/or conclusions. Such conclusions would likely point to rampant homophobia in a show such as *Rescue Me* as indication of an ideologically regressive message, but we have argued that deeper and more nuanced analysis may reveal that something more complex is on offer.

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Notes

1. *Rescue Me* is certainly not alone in using this sort of discourse. Consider, for instance, Katy Perry's mocking song and music video "Ur So Gay" (2007) and *Maxim*'s (1997-) appeals to readers with homophobia rhetorically couched in irony. Onscreen, *The 40-Year Old Virgin*

(2005), *The Hangover* (2009), *The Dilemma* (2011), *South Park* (1997-), *30 Rock* (2006-), and *The League* (2009-), among many other films and television programs, invoke “gay” in any number of ways for apparent comedic effect in markedly heteronormative worlds. However, we assert that such retrograde language within the realm of popular culture must be read in the context of each textual work rather than as a phenomenon with constant meaning across texts.

2. What might be termed “sympathetic antagonists” have been present in other storytelling forms such as literature and film, but until recently—with characters such as Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007)—U.S. television has rarely relied on such a damaged and imperfect protagonist as Tommy Gavin. *Rescue Me* traces Tommy’s personal and professional lives over seven seasons, five of which feature his spiraling self-destruction with only hints of redemption six years after audiences meet the character.
3. *Homicide: Life on the Street* is a notable exception as it presented a multi-season storyline about a central character who discovered his bisexuality.

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Bios

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