

PHOEBE HART

Queensland University of Technology

Intersex onscreen: an overview of recent fictional characters with intersex variations on television

ABSTRACT

Contemporary representations of fictional characters with intersex variations onscreen have changed in step with societal values yet it could be argued there is still slippage. Where once there was the awe and horror of the highly visible carnival sideshow or medical treatise the intersex body is now rendered absent by medical intervention which is invoked to fix the intersexed in both mind and body. This article explores the fictional representation of people with intersex variations on television and in over time. Such texts disrupt unwarranted categorization and erasure of people with intersex variations by ‘owning’ discursive practices, defying current medical interference and promoting ethical debates around the will-to-normalize what is considered to be aberrant, deviant and abject.

KEYWORDS

Film
Television
Intersex
Screen studies
Representation

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I shall be examining the presentation of people with intersex variations in contemporary screen culture. An ‘intersex’ variation occurs in individuals where the reproductive organs are at variance with the genetic sex. Nowadays, many intersex peer support groups and health care specialists also term an intersex variation as a disorder of sex development or DSD (Grovesman Morris 2006; Hughes et al. 2006, 149). Currently it is believed all humans start as ‘intersex’ in utero before typically developing towards male or female phenotypes (Ainsworth 2015). Depending on which variations are described as intersex or a disorder of sexual development (and there are many variations which could be included) the incidence of intersex variations globally is a matter of much conjecture and controversy; some scientists have suggested a frequency as high as between one or two in every 100 individuals (Sax 2002, 174; Fausto-Sterling 1993, 20; Blackless et al. 2000, 161).

My interest in how people with intersex variations are or could be portrayed on screen is lifelong – I have an intersex variation and I have experienced firsthand the shame, stigma and secrecy of growing up “different”. My academic and creative interest in the portrayal of people with intersex variations on screen came to the fore when I became a television writer, producer and director and produced an autobiographical documentary about myself and my family. I called the film *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (Hart 2010) (Figure 1).

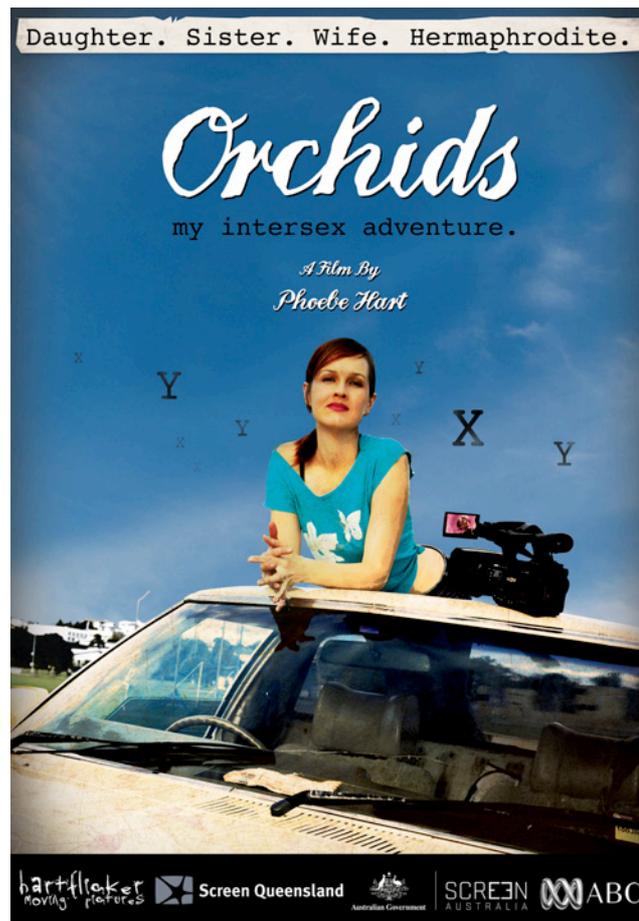


Figure 1: Movie poster for *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2010).

Aside from my own small contribution, in the past ten to fifteen years characters with an intersex variation have become the subject of media items and television programs (Preves 2005-2006, 249). In part, this mirrors the rise in awareness of intersex and its issues generally and activism surrounding these issues (Kessler 1998, 79). Since the early 1990s political activism has highlighted the inequities of current legal and medical frameworks that impact negatively upon people with intersex variations, which has led directly to widespread media and political attention being given to these emergent debates (Chase 2003, 31; Méndez

2013; Preves 2005-2006, 286). Gradually attitudes are beginning to change; yet stigma and its subsequent traumas are still perceived by the intersex community as critical issues (Chase, Courvant and Koyama 2002; Diamond 2004, 626-9; Davis 2015; Jones et al. 2015).

REPRESENTING INTERSEX

Depictions of people with intersex variations as ‘routinely straddl[ing] boundaries between prodigy literature and pornography, mythology and medical discourse’ have changed in line with contemporary values and ethical standards (Gilbert 2000, 145). Still there often slippage toward antiquated and exploitative portrayals of people with unusual bodies in mainstream film and television (Norden 2001, 23). Halberstam notes many films use revulsion, sympathy or empathy in order to grant heteronormative audiences similar admission (2005: 77). Other commentators argue that identification with a character who has an intersex variation may traditionally only be achieved via ‘the perverse pleasure of voyeurism... counterbalanced by horror’ (Grosz 1996, 64). Moreover it could be argued that comparatively very little is seen or heard about the person with intersex variations at all; where once there was the ‘awe and horror’ of the highly visible carnival sideshow or medical treatise, the intersex body in the media sphere has now largely be rendered absent by medical intervention and erasure (Grosz 1996, 60-61; Kerry 2011, 274).

As cultural and social terrains shift across time there is arguably an increase in the visibility of people with intersex variations in modern screen-based media – particularly in fictionalized narratives. Such an increase is perhaps indicative of an acceptance of various subjectivities and even of a postmodern celebration of erotic ambiguity and gender play (Gilbert 2000, 155). This is in no small part due to decades of activism and advocacy (Preves 2005-2006, 286). However, visual storytelling relies on the creation and recognition of stereotypes (Finkelstein 2007, 7). Therefore it is perhaps safe to say that intersexed stereotypes are now becoming more identifiable in popular culture.

As an example, in the British melodrama *Footballers’ Wives* (2003) one version of the stereotype is that of the innocent and passive victim. In Episode 5 of Season Two (‘A Change of Career’) (Lines 2003a), Jackie Pascoe and her child’s biological father Jason Taylor are shocked to discover their son has a womb and ovaries. Jackie and husband Kyle Pascoe decide to raise the baby (Paddy) as their own (Figure 2). Jason horrifies Jackie with his loathing for Paddy when she catches him with a pillow, poised mid-air over the helpless infant (Lines 2003b). The series also portrays an equipoised discussion among the parents

about ‘treatment options’, considering leaving any surgeries until the child is old enough to give informed consent (a clear aspiration of intersex activism (Koyama and Weasel 2002, 171; Diamond and Glenn Beh 2006, 109).



Figure 2: Jason Taylor and Jackie Pascoe (Cristian Solimeno and Gillian Taylforth) in *Footballers' Wives* (2003).

MEDICAL MYSTERIES

A number of television medical drama series over the past decade or more have included characters with intersex variations. On occasion, these series have attempted to portray the lives of people with intersex variations in a sympathetic light, highlighting issues concurrent with the health and psycho-social concerns of the intersex community in general. Others have been more controversial.

In an episode of the American medical dramedy series *House* (2006) entitled ‘Skin Deep’ (Hayman) the disabled doctor and chief protagonist Gregory House has a special patient named Alex, who is a supermodel with mysterious medical symptoms including angry unfeminine outbursts. When House discovers that Alex has Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, an intersex variation, and in fact is suffering from a cancerous inguinal teste, House’s disclosure is (perhaps typically for his character) aimed to shock, using male pronouns instead of female and telling Alex, ‘We’ll cut your balls off and you’ll be fine’.

The episode, like many media items which report on people with intersex variations, is written presumably to attract and entertain normative audiences (Kerry 2011, 263). Aside from the medical inaccuracies in the episode (which wildly underestimates the frequency of

the intersex variation Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome) the narrative suggests that intersexed women have no claim to femininity due solely to her chromosomes and gonads. After the initial broadcast of the episode in the United States there was a strong response from the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), at the time a peak body for intersex support and advocacy which considered the episode ‘so flawed’ and ‘one of the most offensive and hurtful portrayals of people with intersex conditions’ (Herndon 2006).



Figure 3: Cameron Richardson as ‘Alex’ in *House* (2006).

The ‘based-on-truth’ medical drama series *Masters of Sex* has screened on Showtime in the US since 2013. The series is set in the 1950s and 1960s – a time when the medical community was turning its scalpel toward ambiguously-sexed bodies (Van den Wyngaard 1997, 10). Nowadays, these procedures have now been widely accepted to be much more damaging than healing (Diamond and Sigmundson 1997). In the episode entitled ‘Fight’ (2014) the program-makers attempt to examine this obscure moment in medical history through a revisionist lens.

The show's protagonist Dr. Bill Masters (played by Michael Sheen), a groundbreaking researcher of human sexuality and a gynaecologist attends the birth of an intersex child. Masters argues that the child's genitals should be left as they are but when the baby is surgically assigned a male gender by another doctor at the parents' insistence Masters is left to ponder the intransigence of therapeutic doctrine and the nature of masculinity. The passionate defence of the child by one of the medical fraternity's own raises doubt over practices that have since become the institutionalized medical paradigm (Diamond 1999, 1021; Dreger 2006, 74).



Figure 4: Dr. Bill Masters (Michael Sheen, centre) tries to persuade parents of a child with ambiguous genitalia not to continue with gender-assigning surgery in 'Fight' (*Masters of Sex*) (2014).

CELEBRATING FREAKISHNESS

While the semi-autobiographical situational comedy series *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) only enjoyed a limited run on NBC in the United States, it garnered subsequent cult status for its subversive treatment of teenage coming-of-age issues and celebration of the collective high school identification of "nerds" and "stoners" in the early 1980s (Lloyd 2012). The episode entitled 'The Little Things' (Kasdan 2000) deals with the blossoming romantic relationship between band geek Amy Andrews (also known as 'Tuba Girl' and played by Jessica Campbell) and loud-mouthed 'freak' Ken Miller (played by Seth Rogan). Amy (a subsidiary character) confesses to Ken (a main character) that her parents had to choose whether to make her a girl or boy (though she clearly identifies as a girl) which causes Ken to question his own sexuality.

Campbell's portrayal of Amy is nuanced, creating a believable hesitancy while telling Ken about her status and then at once presenting as nervous and upset by Ken's emotional withdrawal from Amy post-disclosure. Her script and performance demonstrate an attempt on the part of the writers and director to recreate a 'real' intersex disclosure narrative. Of course in the context of the series Amy's freakishness is celebrated. However her intersex variation is presented in the format of a love story in order to access a mainstream audience and it is left to the normatively-sexed Ken to decide whether or not their relationship should continue. Although it presents a somewhat unbalanced representation of people with intersex variations 'The Little Things' offers an alternative, even liberating outcome (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Jessica Campbell as Amy Andrews in *Freaks and Geeks* (2000).

The fourth series of the darkly comedic and decidedly camp anthology *American Horror Story*, subtitled *Freak Show*, inhabits the arena of a 1950s small town in Florida USA just at the point when a travelling freakshow and a supernatural presence arrive. In the second episode of the season ('Massacres and Matinees'), we are introduced to the brazen three-breasted Desiree Dupree (Angela Bassett) and her new husband, strongman Del Toledo (Michael Chikli) (Gomez-Rejon 2014). The couple are on the run after Toledo murdered a

gay man for trying to turn straight by making love to Desiree. Proclaiming that she has ‘proper girl parts and a ding-a-ling’, her breasts displayed as highly sexualized zones of the body, Desiree proudly claims her status as a ‘full-blown hermaphrodite’ in order to gain entry to Fraulein Elsa Mars’ (Jessica Lange’s) Cabinet of Curiosities (Figure 6).

Here, Desiree is complete monstrosity, made all the more so thanks to the imbroglio of her race, sexuality, sex and gender and a mash of concurrent stereotypes around black women and their sexualities (Hammonds 1999, 93). Despite the fact that intersex variations in humans do not extend to having a complete set of both male and female reproductive organs (Koyama 2003). Dupree’s physiological incorrectness seems moot in relation to this work; this is *American Horror Story* and as such ‘nothing is off limits’ (Schremph 2014). While there is a risk the non-normalcy illustrated in *Freak Show* serves as purely fetishistic titillation such satire may also call the assumptions of heteronormative viewers to account.



Figure 6: Desiree Dupree (Angela Bassett) in *American Horror Story* (2014).

Some program-makers are becoming more willing to work alongside people with intersex variations when crafting intersex characters for the screen. In the first episode of the second series of MTV’s comedic high school drama *Faking It* (2014), ‘The Morning Aftermath’, one of the main characters, the somewhat conservative yet confrontational teenager Lauren Cooper, is revealed to be intersex. Laudably the program had already developed a number of lesbian and gay characters in the first season of the series although for much of that season

150

Lauren appears homophobic (Travis 2014). Lauren's character develops considerably upon her disclosure as 'intersex', becoming more vulnerable.

To develop Lauren's intersex storyline the writers and producers worked closely with consultants from InterAct, a group for young people with intersex variations or DSD committed to sharing their stories with the world (Inter/Act 2014). *Faking It* showrunner Carter Covington claims the addition of the character demonstrates 'the diversity of experiences that young people are faced with today' (Goldberg 2014). As the series progresses Lauren develops a relationship with classmate Theo, negotiating her difference with courage to create an intimate connection, rupturing 'asexual preinscription' of people with intersex variations (Colligan 2004, 50). Lauren controls her own narrative and 'coming out' and is placed non-objectifying social and romantic situations, opening a space for a 'pure relationship' between the character and the viewer(s) based upon trust and shared experience (Giddens 1991, 6).

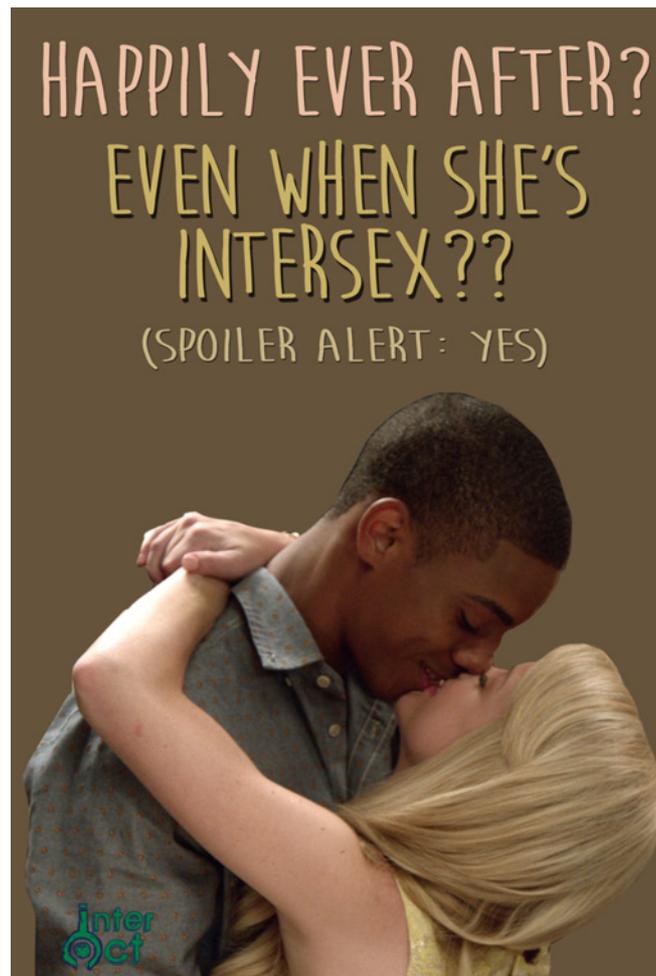


Figure 7: Blog post by InterAct (2014).

CONCLUSION

Halberstam notes that representations of gendered identities on the screen have shifted from simply being a 'tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard' (read: *House*) to productions that attempt to revise concepts such as 'heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment' (2005, 96). Butler reiterates the value of creating works and acts 'that challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs' (1996, 122). In many ways this is what I have attempted with my own creative offerings. Works such as created as an act of subversion and visibility rupture stigma and preinscription, defy current paradigms of medical interference and promote ethical debates around the 'will-to-normalize' what is considered to be aberrant, deviant and abject in favour of awareness, acceptance and closure (Garland Thomson 2005: 264).

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, Claire. 2015. "Sex redefined". In *Nature*: Nature Publishing Group.
- Blackless, Melanie, Anthony Charuvastra, Amanda Derryck, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Karl Lauzanne and Lee Ellen. 2000. "How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis." *American Journal of Human Biology* 12: 151-166.
- Butler, Judith. 1996. "Gender as performance." In *A critical sense: Interviews with intellectuals*, edited by Peter Osborne, 109-126. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chase, Cheryl. 2003. "Hermaphrodites with attitude: Mapping the emergence of intersex political activism." In *Queer studies: An interdisciplinary reader*, edited by Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, 31-45. Malden, Oxford, Melbourne & Kurfurstendamm: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>.
- Chase, Cheryl, Diana Courvant and Emi Koyama. 2002. "Is intersex a disability: Lessons from disability activism in building the intersex movement." In *Queer Disability Conference, San Francisco State University, USA, 2 & 3 June, 2002*, edited by Sumi Colligan.
- Colligan, Sumi. 2004. "Why the intersexed shouldn't be fixed: Insights from queer theory and disability studies." In *Gendering disability*, edited by Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchinson, 45-60. New Brunswick, New Jersey & London: Rutgers University Press.
- Davis, Georgiann. 2015. *Contesting intersex: The dubious diagnosis*. New York: NYU Press.
- Diamond, Milton. 1999. "Pediatric management of ambiguous and traumatized genitalia." *The Journal of Urology* (162): 1021-1028.
- Diamond, Milton. 2004. "Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome and Klinefelter's Syndrome: Sex and gender considerations." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 13 (3): 623-640.
- Diamond, Milton and Hazel Glenn Beh. 2006. "The right to be wrong: Sex and gender decisions." In *Ethics and intersex*, edited by Sharon E. Sytsma, 103-113. Netherlands: Springer.

- Diamond, Milton and H. K. Sigmundson. 1997. "Sex reassignment at birth: Long term review and clinical implications." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 151 (March): 298-304.
- Dreger, Alice Domurat. 2006. "Intersex and human rights: The long view." In *Ethics and intersex*, edited by Sharon E. Sytsma, 73-86. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 1993. "The five sexes: Why male and female are not enough." *The Sciences* (March/April): 20-25.
- Finkelstein, Joanne. 2007. *The art of self invention: Image and identity in popular visual culture*. London & New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gilbert, Ruth. 2000. "'Strange notions': Treatments of early modern hermaphrodites." In *Madness, disability and social exclusion: The archaeology and anthropology of 'difference'*, edited by Jane Hubert, 144-158. London: Routledge.
- Goldberg, Lesley. 2014. "MTV's 'Faking It' to Tell Intersex Story in Season 2." Accessed December 15, 2015. Last modified September 1, 2014. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/mtvs-faking-tell-intersex-story-732076>.
- Gomez-Rejon, Alfonso. 2014. "American Horror Story." *Massacres and Matinees*. Robert M. Williams. Performed Los Angeles, USA: FX Network (viewed October 15, 2014).
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1996. "Intolerable ambiguity: Freaks as/at the limit." In *Freakery: Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 55-67. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Groveman Morris, Sherri. 2006. "DSD but intersex too: Shifting paradigms without abandoning roots." Accessed 29 March, 2007. <http://www.isna.org/node/1067>.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York & London: New York University Press.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. 1999. "Towards a genealogy of black female sexuality: The problematic of silence." In *Feminist Theory and The Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 93-104. New York: Routledge.
- Hart, Phoebe. 2010. *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*. Phoebe Hart. Performed Brisbane, Australia: hartflicker.
- Hayman, Jim. 2006. "House." *Skin deep*. Lawrence Kaplow. Performed Los Angeles, USA: Fox. <http://www.fox.com/house/>.
- Herndon, April. 2006. "'House' gets it wrong." Accessed 2 April, 2007. Last modified 21 February, 2006. <http://www.isna.org/node/1008>.
- Hughes, I. A., Peter A. Lee, C. Houk and S. F. Ahmed. 2006. "Consensus statement on management of intersex disorders " *Journal of Pediatric Urology* 2: 148-162. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/118/2/e488>.
- Inter/Act. 2014. "Inter/Act has been working with MTV's Faking It." Accessed May 20, 2015. <http://interactyouth.org/post/97343969730/inter-act-has-been-working-with-mtvs-faking-it-on>.
- Jones, Tiffany, Morgan Carpenter, Bonnie Hart and Gavi Ansara. 2015. "Intersex study: preliminary demographics and wellbeing data." Paper presented at the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group Australia National Conference, Brisbane, 8 August 2015.
- Kasdan, Jake. 2000. "Freaks and Geeks." *The little things*. Judd Apatow. Performed Los Angeles, USA: Fox.
- Kerry, Stephen. 2011. "Representation of intersex in news media: the case of Kathleen Worrall." *Journal of Gender Studies* 20 (3): 263-277.

- Kessler, Suzanne J. 1998. *Lessons from the intersexed*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Koyama, Emi. 2003. "Intersex FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)." Accessed April 14. Last modified July 23, 2003. <http://www.intersexinitiative.org/>.
- Koyama, Emi and Lisa Weasel. 2002. "From social construction to social justice: Transforming how we teach about intersexuality." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30 (3 & 4): 169-178.
- Lines, Craig. 2003a. "Footballers' wives." *A change of career*. Liz Lake, Claire Phillips and Cameron Roach. Performed London, UK: Shed Media. <http://www.footballerswives.tv/>.
- Lines, Craig. 2003b. "Footballers' wives." *Facing the truth*. Liz Lake, Claire Phillips and Cameron Roach. Performed London, UK: Shed Media. <http://www.footballerswives.tv/>.
- Lloyd, Robert. 2012. "2 Good 2 Be 4Gotten: An Oral History of Freaks and Geeks". In *Vanity Fair*: Condé Nast.
- Méndez, Juan E. 2013. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*. Vol. Twenty-second session, *United Nations General Assembly*. New York, USA: Human Rights Council.
- Norden, Martin F. 2001. "The Hollywood discourse on disability." In *Screening disability: Essays on cinema and disability*, edited by Anthony Enns and Christopher R. Smit, 19-31. Langham, Oxford & New York: University Press of America, Inc.
- Preves, Sharon E. 2005-2006. "Out of the O.R. and into the streets: Exploring the impact of intersex media activism." *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender* 12 (1): 247-288.
- Sax, Leonard. 2002. "How common is intersex? A response to Anne Fausto-Sterling." *The Journal of Sex Research* 39 (3): 174-178.
- Schremph, Kelly. 2014. "Is It OK to Say 'Hermaphrodite'? 'AHS' Three-Breasted Woman Says She's 'Full Blown' But That's Not Very PC." Last modified May 28, 2015. <http://www.bustle.com/articles/44266-is-it-ok-to-say-hermaphrodite-ahs-three-breasted-woman-says-shes-full-blown-but-thats-not>.
- Travis, Jamie. 2014. "Faking It." *Pilot*. Carter Covington and Nellie Nguel. Performed Los Angeles, USA: MTV. Television.
- Van den Wyngaard, Marianne. 1997. *Reinventing the Sexes: The Biomedical Construction of Femininity and Masculinity*, edited by Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Race, Gender and Science*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Phoebe Hart is an award-winning television writer, director and producer and a screen studies academic at the Queensland University of Technology with an interest in screenwriting, autobiography, digital disruption, identity and representation in documentary, cultural studies and feminist phenomenology. She is known particularly for her autobiographical road trip movie, [Orchids: My Intersex Adventure \(2010\)](#), which has been screened and broadcast globally.

Contact: p2.hart@qut.edu.au

SUGGESTED CITATION

Hart, P. (2015), 'Intersex Onscreen: On creating fictional characters with intersex variations for film and television', in Mountfort, P. (ed), *Peer Reviewed Proceedings: 6th Annual Conference, Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand*, Wellington: PopCAANZ, pp. 143-155. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2015/>.