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“Finding Your Place at the Table”: Melodrama as a Vehicle of Identity Exploration in ABC
Family’s *Switched at Birth*

When *Switched at Birth* (2011-2017) premiered on ABC Family, the Monday night lineup slated the series to directly follow *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-2013), the network’s hugely popular series most known for its intense melodrama and puritanical views on teen pregnancy (Nussbaum). By title alone, the new teen drama fit in nicely with ABC Family’s other programming. The series, however, would go on to earn critical acclaim and high ratings, as well as a Peabody Award, by the end of its first season, all while maintaining a clear command of its genre and target demographic.

The premise behind the series is relatively simple, following two teenagers as they attempt to navigate their lives after finding out that they were switched at birth. Bay grew up in a more conservative and affluent family and while Daphne was raised by her single mother in a working-class neighborhood. While aimed toward a teen demographic, a considerable amount of time is also focused on the emotional upheaval their parents go through, and their newfound social conflicts with one another. The focus on the parents, however, is a product of the teen dramas genre, relying on “carefully written and elaborated” adult protagonists in order to ground the teen melodrama in an almost nostalgic view of adolescence (Creeber 39).

This nuance, however, does make the line between family drama and teen drama rather thin (Creeber 39). For instance, *Switched at Birth* won a Peabody Award for “deepening the world of family drama in a way that also truly enlarges the worlds of its viewers” (“Switched at Birth (ABC Family)”). Genre aside, what the Peabody Board referenced specifically is the series’ engagement with the Deaf community and Deaf culture. One of the major plot points in the series is that Daphne is fully deaf¹ and is an active member in the Deaf community in Kansas City. Her community and immediate family are all fluent in American Sign Language and speak ASL with one another without the use of a hearing person interpreting, as was the practice on shows such as *The West Wing* (Grushkin). Bay’s family, while initially visibly uncomfortable with Daphne’s disability, learn to sign throughout the duration of the first season and regularly speak ASL throughout the rest of the series. At one point, some hailed *Switched at Birth* to be “one of the most disability friendly shows on television” (qtd. in Asif 36).

This is not to say that *Switched at Birth* was universally lauded as a critical step forward. Don Grushkin, associate professor in ASL & Deaf Studies at Sacramento State University, is probably the most visible and enduring critic of the series, as he posted popular vlog critiques in ASL after every episode of the show (Grushkin). Ultimately, most of the critique of the series stems from a lack of Deaf presence behind the camera, which ultimately led to the series falling into larger missteps while catering to a mainly hearing audience. As stated previously, the dialogue between two deaf characters would most often be subtitled, but a conversation between deaf and hearing characters would usually utilize simultaneous communication, or the act of

¹ Deaf with an uppercase “D” refers to those who culturally identify as Deaf or as members of the Deaf community, whereas deaf is an adjective describing anyone who has a severe hearing problem, most often deafness/being hard of hearing.

speaking orally while signing, which is rarely ever an actual practice in the Deaf community (Grushkin).

Possibly most egregious to Grushkin, Daphne, a character who was written to have gone fully deaf at the age of six, is portrayed by Katie Leclerc, an actress who was newly deaf at the time and took voice lessons in order “to simulate ‘Deaf speech’” (Grushkin). While there is a larger cast comprised of deaf characters played by deaf actors, and the series did later have episodes concentrated on the nuances of Deaf versus Hearing in cases similar to Leclerc’s, the consensus surrounding the show is that for all of the leaps forward it took, the lack of awareness due to an entirely hearing creative team hindered much of its potential.

Considering the year the series won a Peabody Award, however, it is understandable why the inaugural season of *Switched at Birth* was considered an example of excellence in storytelling. As the first mainstream television series to have both scenes shot entirely in ASL and multiple deaf series regulars (Asif 36), the representation itself on television was significant despite the valid critique of the series, if only hopefully giving way to more nuanced and authentic portrayals in later primetime series.

The aspect of *Switched at Birth* that remains the worthiest of praise is its ability to subvert societal expectations of normalcy in order to explore one’s identity through a process of displacement. The series does not attempt to distance itself from its melodramatic premise in order to elevate the storytelling or attempt to gain higher esteem from more critical viewers. On the contrary, it unabashedly uses tropes and aesthetics of melodramas in order to create plots surrounding the nuances of identity. Being switched at birth, while a marker of the series’ highly melodramatic backdrop and origins, facilitates a situation to allow the characters to “better understand themselves, their families, and their respective places in society” (Asif 36).

The series also explores what constitutes a family, not only from the perspective of the girls in question, rather from the eyes of the parents coming to terms with unknowingly raising someone else's biological child. After the pilot episode, Regina and Daphne agree to move in with the Kennish family, which comes to a head in the following episode as they realize how different their parenting and lifestyles truly are. Kathryn is not comfortable with the amount of freedom Daphne has, while Regina comments on how John and Kathryn have spoiled Bay. As the season progresses, the questions become more complicated than attacks on the other's parenting style. Both Bay and Daphne must come to terms with their ethnic identities and what it means to be raised one way and genetically another, and if it even ultimately matters, considering both are white passing. Regina also later reveals that she knew about the switch early on but did not say anything for fear of losing both girls due to her being a recovering alcoholic and in a precarious financial situation. The "switched at birth" concept, while normally focused on notions of nature versus nurture, in this case allows for the series to poke at conversations surrounding class and race, and the way our identities shape around our understanding of how we fit into these larger structures.

While soap operas remain industrially different from primetime melodramas, many aesthetics and tropes associated with melodrama derive from soap operas (Creeber 72). *Switched at Birth* exhibits both the visual and narrative queues, mainly in its construction of an "inner realism." The concept, first originating in conversation surrounding the series *Dallas* (1978-1991), refers to a kind of psychological realism as opposed to any bearing with reality; the characters feel real, and when they go through heightened emotions, the viewer engages with the characters in a way that triggers heightened emotions within themselves (Ang 47). An extension of this idea of realism is the "external realism," or the stylized portrayal of the characters'

physical surroundings: the clothes they wear, the houses they live in, the places they go (Ang 48). *Switched at Birth*, set in Kansas City as opposed to more popular teen drama settings of California or New York, presents a milieu of American suburbia marred by wealth disparity, but presents it in a highly stylized way. Bay, in trying to imagine the life she could have lived, views Daphne's home in East Riverside with reverence, and the production design utilizes bright colors and creates an otherwise vibrant atmosphere to reflect this. Daphne on the other hand is taken with the huge halls of Buckner High School, the rich private school Bay and her brother Toby attend. Through the portrayals of both characters' perceptions of the setting, the series is able to keep a dichotomy while creating the escapist aesthetics most associated with melodramas and soaps.

Switched at Birth, while firmly rooted in its melodrama, utilizes its genre as a vehicle for compelling storytelling throughout its pilot season and subsequent time on air. Using the melodramatic plot device of characters being switched at birth, the series expands on the concepts of identity which are staples of the teen drama (Creeber 39). The characters go through very traditional teen drama fair: dating, fighting with their parents, and struggling with their identity. It is through not only the inclusion of Deaf culture, as the Peabody Board implied, but its commitment to using tropes and aesthetics in its intended genre in a way that elevates the content within the show that makes *Switched at Birth* a series worth mentioning when discussing what melodramas could be.

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