Sex and Sexualities in Popular Culture: A Networking Knowledge Special Issue

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In November 2015, we held a symposium on the theme of Sex & Sexualities in Popular Culture at the Watershed, Bristol. Having met at a conference on popular music fandom and the public sphere, earlier that year, the symposium was a result of our shared interest in, and work on, sex and sexualities in popular culture. Bethan has worked extensively on antifandom of Fifty Shades of Grey and the moral panics surrounding the 'irrational' behavior of One Direction and Twilight fans. Milena's research focuses on sexual consent in erotic fan fiction, and they have a keen interest in how media and culture interact with the discursive construction of sex, sexualities, and consent. Through the symposium, then, we wanted to afford a platform for postgraduate researchers and creative practitioners exploring the nuances of sex and sexualities within popular culture to meet and share ideas. Of course, the terms 'sex', 'sexualities' and 'popular culture' are not fixed or immutable and while we included suggestions for what papers might examine, the abstracts we received covered a range of topics, from literature and computer games to social media and fan fiction, and advertising to social activism. The symposium was well received both in person and online. We encouraged attendees to live tweet using the hashtag #popsex15, and discussions took place both at the Watershed and on Twitter about consent, the normative depictions of sex and relationships in popular culture, misogynistic hate speech and intersex characters in literature. The amount of engagement with the ideas and themes coming out of the symposium suggested that a deeper analysis was needed, and this special issue of *Networking Knowledge* - *Journal of the MeCCSA-PGN* attempts to engage in more detail with some of these.

In the lead-up to the symposium and throughout the time we have been working on this special issue, concerns about sex and sexualities in popular culture have been at the forefront of feminist activism, and have gained prominence in both mainstream media coverage and academic research. Creative practitioners have come under fire for poor representations of sex and sexualities, as evidenced for instance by the reception of Joss Whedon's treatment of Black Widow in The Avengers: Age of Ultron; equally they have been celebrated for their efforts, as was the case with BioWare's inclusion of a consent negotiation scene in Dragon Age: Inquisition. Since our 2015 event, we have seen both the box office success and backlash against films such as Mad Max Fury Road (noted for strong feminist themes and female leads in a traditionally male-dominated franchise) and Star Wars: The Force Awakens (which upset 'Men's Rights Activists' through its failure to feature a straight, white, male hero). HBO's *Game of Thrones* continues to attract criticism for its gratuitous representation of rape and incest, while remaining wildly popular with audiences. Disney's Moana, while praised for its representation of Polynesian culture, has also been criticised for perpetuating tropes of 'strong' women of colour without romantic interests. Fan fiction has received even more mainstream coverage with speculation that pressure from fans may move Disney to

make one of the leads in the latest *Star Wars* trilogy canonically gay. And of course many aspects of sex and sexualities remain silenced and unrepresented in popular culture, much like *Wonder Woman*'s 'blink and you'll miss it' queerness.

Academic interest in sex and sexualities in popular culture has also continued to grow. 2016 saw the publication of Catherine Roach's *Happily Ever After*, which revisits the popular romance genre from both an academic and creative practitioner perspective. In the same year Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart's edited collection Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-Ass Chicks was also published. It interrogates the ways in which fantasy allows for the challenging of gender and sexuality norms. In 2017, Transformative Works and Cultures produced a special issue on 'Queer Female Fandom' in which, among others, Eve Ng examines discourses of queerbaiting - the practice by creative producers of hinting at queer content in their shows to attract diverse audiences while never following through on such promises. The 2017 Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality, edited by Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood with Brian McNair, also addressed the representation of sex and sexualities across formats and genres including music videos and reality TV. Alex Naylor (2016) explores fan reactions to the character of Sansa Stark in HBO's Game of Thrones, a teenage girl whose age, gender, and sexuality have inspired a love/hate relationship with her among the show's fandom. Issues of sex and sexuality were also foregrounded in the 2016 US presidential election, with Michael Mario Albrecht (2017) noting that misogynistic discourse surrounding Hilary Clinton circulated on many social media channels in the form of memes.

This popular, activist and academic zeitgeist, then, is what we seek to tap into with this special issue of *Networking Knowledge*. The papers in it offer varied, challenging, engaging and detailed analysis of specific aspects of popular culture, utilising a range of interdisciplinary approaches. The papers featured herein cover a range of issues concerning sex, sexualities, and popular culture. From transformative works to an analysis of the role of the auteur, these essays demonstrate the myriad ways that sex and sexualities can be depicted, decoded, transformed and contested within and through engagement with popular culture. They speak to the absolutely vital role popular culture plays in shaping our experience of sex and sexualities.

An overview of the articles

Our first paper, by **Elly Scrine**, offers an extensive analysis of how young people engaged with two different music videos, and how they explored gender and sexuality through this engagement. Conducting focus groups with Australian high schools students, Scrine explores how popular culture functions 'as a structure that reflects, mediates and reinforces normative beliefs about how gender and sexuality should be taken up and performed' (7). Music videos, as one aspect of popular culture that young people have access to, have been roundly criticised for their depiction of non-normative gender and sexuality, and Scrine's engagement with 14-16-year-olds offers an insight into how they understand their relationship to the videos and the depictions of gender and sexuality they entail. Responses, as Scrine notes,

varied widely and '[a]ttitudes around women's behaviour in relation to sex generated particularly heated discussion' (14). Despite this, however, Scrine identifies three standout themes that dominated the conversation, and that offer illuminating insights into young people's negotiation of popular culture: 'empowerment vs oppression', 'sluts vs prudes', and 'no consent vs asking for it'.

If Scrine analyses how young people perceive popular culture and what it says about gender and sexuality, **Kodi Maier** explores the 'textual poaching' that takes place when fans are frustrated with the canonical text (Jenkins, 1992). Maier specifically focuses on LGBT+ transformative works within the Disney fandom, noting that 'Walt Disney Studios wields far more influence and power over modern Western culture than any other entertainment company, a fact that endows the studio with the potential to legitimise or further other minorities' (29). Fans who wish to see characters like themselves depicted in the Disney universe create a range of material featuring lesbian and bisexual relationships, including moodboards, GIFs, videos and fan fiction stories. In this way, despite the continued refusal to acknowledge queer characters within the canon, fans are able to generate their own positive representation and foster a community around it.

Representation is a key theme in **Naomi Frisby**'s article on the depiction of intersex people in circus novels. Frisby notes that these are one genre in which we might expect to find a diverse range of characters, the circus having 'been seen as a safe space for those who fall outside of mainstream society, particularly those with non-normative bodies' (44). Her analysis of three contemporary American circus novels, however, suggests that in order to maintain the mainstream reader's interest, marginalised people are instead often used to provide entertainment. In *The Bearded Lady* and *The Transformation of Bartholomew*, the identities of the intersex characters are hidden and readers encouraged to see them as female. Frisby argues that the authors are guilty of dehumanising these characters, using them as a plot device. *Pantomime*, in contrast, has been praised by LGBT+ reviewers yet the relationships between the main characters are conceived within a heteronormative framework. Even within a genre that we might expect to be sympathetic to non-normative characters, intersex people are still used as plot devices rather than portrayals of human beings.

Emily Rowson turns the focus of the special issue to Hollywood, in particular the politics and rhetoric of reproduction. She analyses narratives surrounding reproduction and infertility in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, arguing that although attitudes to reproduction have improved since the 1960s, the 'association of monstrosity with pregnancy still abounds in cinema' (60). This is evident in reactions to *Avengers* and *Mad Max*, the former criticised for its apparent misogyny and the latter praised by feminists for arousing the ire of men's rights activists. Rowson argues that these differences in reception can be attributed to concerns of authorship, industry, and a post-feminist media context, and analyses each of these issues through the course of the article, pointing out how the dichotomy created between the two films is considerably more complex than may be considered, with each offering critiques of male, or governmental, control of women's bodies.

The final article in this issue returns to animation through an examination of the representations of race and male same-sex desire portrayed by black gay male characters in adult animation. **Irene Fubara-Manuel** analyses *The Boondocks* and in particular the images of the male matriarch, booty warrior, and homothug in the series, and their iterations in three other animated TV shows. Fubara-Manuel opens with an overview of 'revolting animation' (see Halberstam 2011) and asks how *The Boondocks*, *Chozen*, *American Dad!* and *The Cleveland Show* revolt against heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, while at times being complicit in this system. She outlines how the media portrayed white gay men as attractive, tasteful and successful, yet black men were absent from these portrayals or – if they were represented – 'they depicted ghettoised hypermasculinity, thus igniting the racial fantasies of the "homothug" (McBride 2005, 88) or "trade" (102) within gay culture' (74). From the mainstream media, three 'oft-characterised' signs of black gay men made their way into adult animation, and while the animated characters 'revolt in several manners, the narratives through which they are portrayed shows the construction of black gay masculinity as a contradicting form of animated excess' (80).

The papers presented in the issue that follows thus, we believe, offer readers an insight into aspects of popular culture that have heretofore been neglected, despite the resurgence of interest in representations of sex and sexualities from mainstream media, activists, and academia alike. From femslash to black, gay animated characters, issues of sex and sexualities in popular culture encompass many varied aspects. While this special issue only scratches the surface, we hope that its themes and theorisations will be taken forward by other scholars, as this area of research is vital for our understanding of the multitudes of diverse experiences of sex and sexualities and their mediation.

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