Networking Knowledge

Volume 10 Issue 3 Oct. 2017

Sex and Sexualities

in Popular Culture

Edited by

Milena Popova and Bethan Jones

Cover image by Patricia Prieto-Blanco

Networking Knowledge 10(3)

Special Issue

Sex and Sexualities in Popular Culture

Edited by Milena Popova and Bethan Jones

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

BETHAN JONES, *University of Huddersfield*
MILENA POPOVA, *University of the West of England*

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 anti-fandom 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.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank a number of people without whom this issue would not have been possible. We are grateful to Patricia Prieto-Blanco and the team at *Networking Knowledge* for their enthusiasm for the subject and the help they provided during the course of the editorial process. We are also indebted to the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England and the Pervasive Media Studio at Bristol Watershed for supporting the original Sex & Sexualities in Popular Culture symposium. We are incredibly grateful to our reviewers for their speedy turnarounds and helpful advice on the articles selected for inclusion: Melanie J. Kennedy, Rebecca Williams, Niall Brennan, Anaïs Duong-Pedica, Bertha Chin, Jason A. Smith, Adam Scales, Christopher Holliday, Anne Currier Sweet, Hannah Grist, Georgina Newton, Jack Harbord, Andreas Rauh Ortega, Chris Baumann. Finally, we wish to thank our contributors. This issue would not have been possible without them.

References

Albrecht, M. M. (2017) 'Bernie Bros and the gender schism in the 2016 US presidential election,' *Feminist Media Studies* 17(3), 509-513.

Halberstam, J. (2011) *Queer art of failure*, London: Duke University Press.

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers*, New York: Routledge.

McBride, D. (2005) *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality*, New York: NYU Press.

Naylor, A. (2016) '"My Skin Has Turned to Porcelain, to Ivory, to Steel": Feminist Fan Discourses, Game of Thrones, and the Problem of Sansa', in E. R. Helford, S. Carroll, S. Gray, & M. R. Howard (eds.), *The Woman Fantastic in Contemporary American Media Culture,* Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 39-60.

Ng, Eve. (2017) 'Between Text, Paratext, and Context: Queerbaiting and the Contemporary Media Landscape', in "Queer Female Fandom," edited by Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 24. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.917.

Roach, C. M. (2016) *Happy Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Roberts, J. and MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2016) *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-Ass Chicks,* New York: Routledge.

Smith, C., Attwood, F. and McNair, B. (2017) *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality,* New York: Routledge.

Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate in the University of Huddersfield. Her thesis examines cult television, nostalgia and fandom through a focus on *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* revivals. Bethan has written on a range of topics relating to gender, fandom and digital media and has been published in the journals *Sexualities, Participations* and *Transformative Works and Cultures*, among others. She has co-edited journal issues on transmedia board games, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and crowdfunding, and her co-edited book on crowdfunding was published with Peter Lang in 2015.

Email: bethan.jones@huds.ac.uk

Milena Popova is a PhD researcher interested in gender, sexuality and culture. Their current research focuses on issues of power and sexual consent in erotic fan fiction as a form of cultural activism. They also work with creative practitioners in the cultural industries to improve the representation of consent (sexual and otherwise) in popular culture.

Email: Milena2.Popova@live.uwe.ac.uk

‘Dear Future Husband’: young people’s critical exploration of gender and sexuality in pop music videos

ELLY SCRINE, *University of Melbourne*

ABSTRACT
This study aimed to explore how young people can critically engage with music videos to explore dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. As the primary consumers of popular music and music videos, adolescents are also a group who exist in a unique sociocultural space, where both misogyny and feminism are present in their highly media-driven lives. This study used focus group workshops with young people in high school to generate qualitative data based on the participants’ discussion and interpretations of gender and sexuality in two music videos. Seven groups of young people aged 14 – 16 analysed two popular music videos and reflected particularly upon discourses of expected femininity and female sexuality. Discussion elucidated insightful analysis around gendered subjectivity, and presented three complex and opposing themes, which are explored in detail. A cohesive thread emerged in the data in which young people demonstrated their capacity to identify hegemonic gender constructs, while also relying on these constructs to read and police the women shown in the music videos.

KEYWORDS
Gender, sexuality, popular music, music videos, adolescents

Gender in young people’s current lives

Young people establish their identity and independence through the broader political, cultural and socio-structural contexts in which they operate. High schools exist not only as a physical place in which adolescents spend a significant amount of their time, but also a socio-political sphere where the performance, negotiation and reproduction of gender norms are enacted through overt and covert structures (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben 2013, 365). This study is situated in a unique sociocultural point in the lives of young people in high school, a time wherein both misogyny and threat to women, alongside feminism and resistance, are palpable in young people’s lives. In Australia, on average one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner, and 95% of partner violence is perpetrated by a male (Our Watch 2015). Globally, prevalence figures indicate that approximately one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO 2013). A symptom of misogyny in contemporary sociocultural context is known as rape culture, defined by feminist activists in the 1970s as the normalisation of aggressive male sexuality, and the woman’s role in deserving or provoking sexual violence (Attenborough 2014). Contemporary popular culture responses to violence and misogyny have seen feminism visibilised to young people in particular, from pop singer Beyoncé’s performance at the MTV Video Music awards in front of an illuminated screen

reading 'FEMINIST' (Bennett 2014), to Taylor Swift's public media relationship with feminism (Keishin Armstrong 2016). Young people's responses in and around schools have been documented in feminist scholarship in recent years, such as setting up high school collectives to challenge rape culture and explore feminist consciousness, and using online digital spaces to promote feminist discourse (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose 2016; Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2016, 85).

Schilt and Westbrook (2009) describe how the persistence of gender inequality is underpinned by cultural acceptance of a binary gender system, where only two genders reflect a corresponding biological sex, and attraction to the 'opposite' gender is natural and acceptable. Compulsory heterosexuality is thought to function in social and power structures as heteronormativity – the assumption and maintenance of the heterosexual gender binary throughout cultural, legal and institutional practices. However, sociological research has, since the 1980s, adopted a post-structuralist theory of gender as a social construct, transforming the notion of gender from something we *are* or *have*, to a salient set of categories that we *do* (Gergen 1985). Gender is thus something every person performs and produces, based on dominant social norms (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). West and Zimmerman (1987) first outlined how the construction of a person's gender identity is complex, fluid and influenced actively by external dominant cultural constructs that constitute what is 'appropriate' feminine and masculine behaviour. Theorists have also since argued that the practices and processes of doing gender are inextricably linked to the maintenance of heteronormativity (e.g. Toomey, McGuire & Russell 2012).

The media and young people's attitudes and beliefs

Working from the premise that gender is a social construction compels an understanding of how the narratives delivered through socio-cultural structures shape an individual's developing identity. Popular media is referred to in feminist literature as a structure that reflects, mediates and reinforces normative beliefs about how gender and sexuality should be taken up and performed (e.g. hooks 1992; Brooks & Hébert 2006). Personal devices mean video content cultivates online dialogue and connection among networks of young people, and new media technologies are hosting content that is increasingly integral to young people's social politics, including digital feminisms (Retallack et al. 2016, 88). Papacharissi (2015, 21) describes how digital media cultivates affect, and invites the audience to consume content through creating an affective relationship with the media's subject. Grusin (2010) describes the particular potency of audio and visual content combined in digital medias, in not only cultivating this affective relationship between the audience and subject, but also through its depiction of the affective states of others.

Trends in young people's digital media use show that while use of devices varies across intersections of gender, race, class, age and psychosocial variables, overall, media exposure is understood to begin very early in a child's life, and emergence of new mediums accompany,

rather than displace, older mediums (Roberts & Foehr 2008). Texts, images and stories are delivered through commodified media such as television, music, film, radio and more, and transmit values and desires that are not only gendered, but also deeply raced and classed. While feminist theory has historically focused on women's shared experience of oppression, more recent discourse has begun to acknowledge the profound differences among women, based on axes of race, class, sexuality, disability and more (e.g. Brooks & Hébert 2006). While this article focuses on young people's negotiations of gender in popular music videos, I acknowledge that this is just one singular component of power relations represented and regulated within this form of media. Critical explorations of power discourses and the intersections of gender and race in popular media can be found in literature such as hooks (1992), Brooks and Hébert (2006), Holtzman and Sharpe (2014) and Dines and Humez (2015).

There is a wealth of literature that aims to inform our current understanding of young people's ideologies and attitudes regarding gender and sexualities. I will first briefly outline several recent quantitative studies to contextualise the nature of young people's supportive attitudes to violence and sexual assault. Such research has named young people a unique group who hold particularly low levels of knowledge about, and higher attitudinal support for violence against women (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan 2009; VicHealth 2010). A national study in Australia (Harris et al. 2015) found that up to a quarter of the young people surveyed were prepared to excuse partner violence depending on the scenario, while one in five believed women share some responsibility for sexual assault. The report stated that *most* young people believe violence is due to men being unable to control their anger, and that two in five young people believe rape results from uncontrollable sexual urges, notions that feminist scholarship align with rape culture (Klein 1997; Rodier & Meagher 2014). Harris et al. (2015) referred to media and schools as the two key factors that influence the knowledge and attitudes of young people regarding gender-based violence.

'Girls can do anything'

Multiple other studies identify young people as the primary group to whom media and popular culture is central in shaping gender and sexual ideologies (Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006; Moloney & Pelehach 2014). Little and Hoskins (2004) highlight the complex and profuse role of the media in shaping the rigid scripts of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality that young people must negotiate. The authors propose that young people's lives are foreshadowed by a saturation of media which particularly highlight narratives of sexism, infantilisation, colonialism and contradiction. The sense of contradiction, they argue, lies in how media and popular culture construct a false sense of freedom for young people, wherein they are given a message that they have limitless choice, that 'gender no longer matters', and in particular, that girls can 'do anything' (Little & Hoskins 2004, 79). What McRobbie (2009) describes as a 'postfeminist' sensibility arises for young women, who through social and institutional structures, are given the message that they are free to pave the course of their own life, due to the successful social,

economic and cultural gains of last century's feminist movements. However, McRobbie (2009) along with other authors such as Gill (2008) and Ringrose (2013) have articulated a phenomenon in which during adolescence and the emergence and creation of self, young people find themselves bound by a new form of self-policing gendered subjectivity. Girls are thus held hostage in their supposed freedom, by media and popular culture driven by a consumerist culture of desire, and the neoliberal pursuit for success (Little & Hoskins 2004). The notion of being held hostage draws on the work of Gergen (2001, 82) who posed that we are all, regardless of identity, held hostage by social conventions. Gill (2008) contends that these social conventions crucially emphasise autonomous choice, requiring girls as neoliberal and postfeminist subjects to self regulate their life story, make the right choices, and pursue self-perfection. The postfeminist landscape means they are provided with little language to understand and locate themselves, in a patriarchy they are told no longer exists (Gill 2008).

Good girls and bad girls

One example of identity delivered to young women through popular culture is the 'good girl'. Hillier, Harrison and Bowditch (1999, 71) described the 'good girl' as a dominant expected performance of femininity, characterised by a sense of naiveté and confining a young woman's experience of her own gender and sexuality to the labels available to her. A woman's sense of sexuality is hence limited to her capacity to be an object of desire, rather than an active pursuer of sex. Froyum (2010) explored the distinct cultural dichotomy of the socially acceptable 'good girl', and sexually assertive alternative, the provocative and immoral 'bad girl', who is thus socially rejected. Froyum crucially notes the racialised and classed components of girls' sexualities, and how media narratives particularly present low-income black girls to embody the 'bad girl' cultural subject.

Armstrong et al. (2014) also echoed the good girl/bad girl subjectivity when exploring gender and the slut discourse with young American women. Armstrong et al. (2014) refer to the expectation that men desire and pursue sexual activity, while 'good' women are permitted only to consent. Context provides a useful framework for analysing such standards and expectations, in that for young men, (heterosexual) sex is sought after and pursued, regardless of the emotional and relational context, such as relationships, or being in love. Conversely, the literature widely describes how young women are subjected to intense scrutiny of context in regards to (hetero)sexuality – whether they are in a relationship, how long this relationship has lasted, whether they are in love, their clothing, appearance and behaviour around the opposite sex (Armstrong et al. 2014; Froyum 2010; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006; Hillier et al. 1999). This further reinforces a heteronormative sensibility in young women, that a good girl is always aiming to attract a male partner, she does this for love rather than sexual appetite, and she will be subjected to social policing of 'right' and 'wrong' ways to perform her heterosexual femininity. This social policing works to construct and uphold the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. Where a

young woman violates the code of the 'good girl', she faces public denigration for her failure to perform this identity, policed by the social practice of slut shaming (Armstrong et al. 2014).

Gender, sexualities and the music video

Music videos are a form of popular media that has received particularly widespread criticism in the literature for their exploitation, objectification, and domination of non-male and non-normative bodies and sexualities (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang 2009; Oosten et al. 2015; Peter & Valkenburg 2007). Critiques in quantitative research tend to focus on levels of degrading sexual references and sexualised imagery, such as Primack, Gold, Schwarz and Dalton's (2008) content analysis of pop music for references to sexual activity. Primack et al. (2008) found that over a third of 279 pop songs from 2005 referenced sexual activity in the lyrics, and more than half of these references were considered (by the researchers) sexually degrading towards women. Frisby and Aubrey (2012) looked at race and genre in music videos, and explored how genres of hip hop, pop and country each indicate distinct expectations around women's (hetero)sexuality. Hip hop and rap music has consistently generated criticism from within the research and more broadly for misogynistic and 'antisocial' themes (hooks 1992; Ward, Hansbrough & Walker 2005; Conrad et al. 2009), while country music has been regarded as a more conservative alternative. Frisby and Aubrey (2012) concluded in their content analysis that both black and white female bodies are sexualised and objectified across hip hop and pop genres, and that women's bodies exist in music videos 'for the consumption and pleasure of the viewers' (82). Other findings indicate that sexualised music video content may increase viewers' association with women as sex objects (Kristler & Lee 2009), and that misogynistic music videos increase adolescent viewers' acceptance of 'female token resistance' – the belief that women say 'no' when they really mean 'yes' (to heterosexual sex) (Oosten et al. 2015). The notion of female token resistance undermines women's capacity to give an authentic response of consent, and relies on the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. A 'good girl' would not *receive* the sexual advances of men actively with a 'yes', but rather passively, while bad girls *express* their sexual desires (Brown et al. 2002, 3).

Renold and Ringrose (2011) interrogate the public and private anxieties over the notion of 'over-sexualisation'. Their study emphasises the highly raced and classed discourse in media that both over-simplifies the complex position of girls in sexual cultures, and flattens out social and cultural difference. There is a distinct lack of research that seeks to understand how young people actually negotiate highly sexualised content in popular music. Ward (2003) conducted a substantial review of the media in adolescent sexual socialisation. The results outlined the need for further research in 14 areas, which included exploring young people's critical viewing skills, how viewers actually interpret sexual content, and expanding dimensions other than sexual content and amounts of exposure. Renold and Ringrose (2011) more recently repeated that there remains little investigation into these dimensions. Instead, they argue, a white, middle class

moral panic continues to drive investigation of sexualisation in the media, through a focus on protectionism, victimisation and objectification.

Young people's consumption of music videos is particularly salient when considering the significant and multifaceted relationship that young people have with music (Saarikallio, Gold, & McFerran 2015). Scholarship into the integral value that music holds for young people has documented its role in the constructions, expression and performance of their identity (Carmen 2009; Ruud 1997). Music is engaging and pleasurable for young people, who can spend up to three hours per day watching music videos (Oosten et al. 2015). Research by Harris et al. (2015) into young people's gender attitudes are informed by this understanding, and have recommended that young people be better supported to engage critically with popular media. Multiple studies cited above outline the ways young people engage with media and music videos in particular, and the highly subjective gendered narratives foregrounded in these medias. The research has clearly outlined how gender portrayals may influence young people's attitudes, though there is little investigation into understanding their critical negotiation of music videos.

By exploring music videos in discussion with young people in high school, the current project aimed to emphasise the voices of young people themselves. The purpose of this study was to engage young people in critical discussion to generate rich qualitative data focused on their gendered analysis of music video content. The following research question guided the study:
'How did groups of young people in high school respond to representations of gender and sexuality in two selected popular music videos?'

Method

Setting and Participants

Focus group workshops were conducted across seven diverse school settings around the United Kingdom, and Melbourne, Australia. The schools were recruited through professional and research networks, and these schools ranged from mainstream high schools to specialised facilities for young people at risk. Recruitment aims were focused on capturing enough data and highlighting the voices of young people across a range of diverse demographics, rather than making any attempt for generalisability of results. Participants were students ages 14 – 16.

The schools were all co-educational, and I did not separate students by sex. I established that a gendered analysis of the data was not the focus of this study, and that the practice of segregating young people by sex would risk exclusion or harm to participants who were transgender and/or gender non-conforming. I did not aim to meet quotas in regards to gender and sexual diversity, but there were several participants who openly identified themselves using the words 'queer', 'gay', 'non-binary' and 'trans'. I have chosen not to include quantitative information on numbers of 'girls', 'boys', 'heterosexuals' and 'others', due to the potential for these processes of differentiation and demarcation to 'other' identities that do not fall into the white, heterosexual

gender binary (as outlined in Jensen 2011). The young people were from a variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations. The seven groups ranged in size from 5 – 18 participants.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted within one-off focus group workshops. The workshops were similar to focus groups in a methodological sense (Morgan 1997, 31), in that I asked the young people a range of questions to stimulate group discussion. The data for this article is based on what the participants described in discussions about two music videos. The entire discussion was audio recorded for data analysis.

The music videos

Two music videos were selected based on a shortlist I made of Top 40 songs that contained visual and lyrical themes of gender and sexuality that I anticipated young people would be able to identify and discuss, such as gender stereotypical images, references to sex, and representation of sexual and non sexual relationships. The two final music videos selected were 'Dear Future Husband' by Meghan Trainor (Trainor 2015) and 'Literally I Can't' by Play n Skillz and Redfoo (Play n Skillz 2014).

'Dear Future Husband' by Meghan Trainor held a top position in the charts at the time in both the UK and Australia. The song's lyrics are based around the singer's requests to a future 'perfect' partner (male), and the video clip features a 1950's style home with Trainor completing a range of domestic duties while potential male suitors arrive at her house. Because the data specifically reference the lyrical content, I have included the following pre-chorus and chorus lyrics in order to better contextualise the discussion below, which analyses these lyrics in detail.

> *'You gotta know how to treat me like a lady*
> *Even when I'm acting crazy*
> *Tell me everything's alright.*
> *Dear future husband, here's a few things you need to know if*
> *You want to be my one and only all my life.*
> *Dear future husband, if you want to get that special loving,*
> *Tell me I'm beautiful, each and every night'*

'Literally I Can't' was selected as contrasting piece to generate discussion. The video depicts an American frat party scene, where a group of men repeatedly ask a group of women to participate in partying and sexual acts, to which the women repeatedly decline. The lyrical content and visual narrative alludes to sexual assault, *'Girl I know that you can, I don't want to hear no'*, and the objectification and silencing of women,

'I said jump on the pole,
I didn't mean your opinion
Girl I'm sipping on this drink
Trying to see what you've got,
Not trying to hear what you think'

The song engendered widespread media coverage in Australia because the artist, Redfoo, was also a judge on a popular television series, X Factor. Newspaper articles such as The Guardian (Tan 2014) and Herald Sun (Dennehy 2014) reported that Redfoo may be fired from his position on the television series due to the song's offensive content. These articles referred to the song using words such as 'full blown misogyny', 'rape culture', 'sexist' and 'aggressive stereotypes'. Given the critical reception of the music video, and my own interpretation of the video's gendered demarcation of sexual roles and suggested sexual violence, I anticipated 'Literally I Can't' might engender more overt responses to among the participants.

Data Analysis

In order to first approach the complex data that had emerged in these group conversations, I employed a technique derived from Lawrence Ferrara's approach to musical phenomenological analysis (Ferrara 1984). The model is guided by phenomenological principles that emphasise how description is the least distant way of representing a perceived reality. In practice, the model utilises distinct narrative descriptions across multiple levels of listening, to generate multidimensional and comprehensive descriptions that look at the event from a variety of standpoints (McFerran & Wigram 2005).

Four distinct layers of narrative description were outlined for the four times I listened to the audio recordings, with the aim of emphasising reflexivity and providing rich context for this data:

1. My personal reactions to what was heard

2. The dynamics of engagement in the room

3. Actual references to gender and sexuality in words

4. Key standout themes in the discussion

After this four-step in-depth narrative analysis was completed for each of the focus groups, I then looked across the data for tentative emerging ideas, in a process comparable to open coding in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998, 101). I grouped quotes under these ideas, which could

then be refined to create an integrated story, connecting categories and their associated context (established through the in-depth narrative analysis). Although this methodology aimed to provide rich context and emphasise the voices of the young people themselves, analysis necessitated a level of critical interpretation from me as the researcher, of which my own subjective lens cannot be separated. As a feminist researcher, I was particularly looking for young people's responses that made reference to gendered imbalances of power and privilege. My interpretations of key standout themes were formed not only by noting attitudes that were raised repeatedly, or with particular agreement/disagreement from other participants, but also those which particularly struck me as a feminist researcher. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Results and Discussion

In the same sense that there is no singular or objective definition of feminism and the meaning it holds to people, there was no single robust or prevailing finding that encapsulated these young people's understanding and negotiation of these music videos. Responses from participants ranged widely, both within each school context and across the focus groups more broadly. Analysing the data was at times confronting, as was conducting the groups themselves, particularly when themes of sexual violence rose among participants. Attitudes around women's behaviour in relation to sex generated particularly heated discussion, and inevitably impacted on me personally as the researcher, both during the discussions and in my analysis. Rather than avoiding this data, I chose to explore this aspect in particular detail. The results have been constructed in relation to the three sets of dichotomies that presented themselves through the data: 'empowerment vs oppression', 'sluts vs prudes', and 'no consent vs asking for it'. These terms were derived from the participants' frequently used words, and terms I had coded as key standout themes in the final stage of the data analysis. In presenting the results in this format, there formed a cohesive thread that characterised the complex and opposing shapes that rose out of the participants' interpretations.

Empowerment vs Oppression in 'Dear Future Husband'

> Researcher: 'How did the clip represent women do you think?'
> - 'Demanding'
> - 'Very demanding'
> - 'Yeah'
> - 'No! She's also saying, 'Don't leave me at home doing all the work!'

The groups were each divided in their interpretation of whether the 'Dear Future Husband' narrative represented empowerment for women, or upheld oppressive, traditional performances of femininity. In two groups this caused heated arguments between participants who felt strongly either way. The participants who interpreted the song as empowering commonly justified this

through a paradox they identified in the 'housewife' visual narrative, juxtaposed by the assertive lyrics that told the future husband what was expected of him:

> 'It's funny cos she goes on about being the perfect wife, and it's an old fashioned sexist kind of look, which makes everyone think it's all this, but the lyrics are completely different! She's like, do this, do that, I'll get you what you need, but I don't know how to cook so don't expect me to cook!'

The participants who were 'for' the song as empowering referenced two of the song's lyrics in particular, in which Trainor sings that she's, 'got that 9-5' (job), and 'never learned to cook'. Their interpretations implied that the message of the song itself was overall empowering, because Trainor made it clear she was not a stereotypical woman who would cook and not work, and they drew the attention of those who disagreed back to these lyrics several times. One possible interpretation of these results is that these young people are, through a postfeminist discourse, certainly aware that stereotypes of women in their domestic roles are sexist, and representative of an outdated gender order. Furthermore, they interpreted the song's explicit subversion of these stereotypes as *negating* sexism in the narrative, potentially because they view the emancipation from these traditional gender roles as the reason for, and purpose of feminism.

The young people who felt the song was an empowering message also justified their discussion through the heterosexual relationship framework, unsurprising given the song is focused around a heteronormative narrative. The participants referenced phrases that appear in the song about being 'treated like a lady' and made comments such as, 'he's gotta be perfect for her to be perfect'. Some of the participants read this as a position of power, or equality at least, whereas others strongly disagreed. Often the groups spent some time in discussion, negotiating the themes of assertiveness presented in the singer's requests for her 'future husband', and deliberating together what these meant for her femininity:

> 'Being assertive is seen as unattractive in a woman. People would see that and think she's being demanding and that's unattractive. I don't think she's trying to do that, she's just saying, 'Well this is what I want'.'
> 'I think it's meant to be empowering to some extent. Like, you're not just going to have me – you need to work for it'.

The song lyrics construct the singer's 'special loving' as her main contribution to the relationship, which is to be withheld should the partner not meet her expectations. The participants' analysis saw this as a symbol of empowerment, in that Meghan Trainor's character held power in making the men 'work for it'. In line with the gendered narratives which place men as the natural pursuers and beneficiaries of (heterosexual) sex, and women as passive recipients, none of the groups identified the absence of the character's own sexual desire. Given the well-documented lack of positive feminine sexuality in young people's sexual scripts (Hillier

et al. 1999; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006), it was unsurprising that the participants did not draw attention to something they have no discourse or language to explore. However, many participants strongly disagreed with the interpretation of the song as 'empowering', for several other reasons. These participants noted how the narrative reinforced a dominant traditional form of femininity wherein women are marriage obsessed, consumerist and image-focussed, and can be best shown respect, love and affection through the purchase of gifts. Their analyses were framed around a resentment of pop culture messages that confine expressions of femininity to superficial and submissive stereotypes, specifically, girls doing anything men want them to do. The female participants tended to speak from a personal perspective and indicated that they viewed these stereotypes as harmful because they reflected badly upon themselves as girls:

> 'I just don't like the message of the song. Like girls are always the ones who receive the gifts, they never give the guys chocolates. They never get him anything, it's just about like, 'Oh treat me like a lady, and I'll do whatever you want!''
> 'It's just about how girls are always doing what men want them to… it basically says girls always want flowers and chocolates, and like, I'll do anything you want me to.'
> 'I just don't like the song cos in some bits she'll say like 'if you want my special loving you have to do this'. And it's like, well, not really. Like if you want me and my body, then you have to do this and that for me.'
> (Boys call out) - 'Slavery!'

This final above quote illustrated the engagement of some of the male participants in the analysis of this video clip, which was at times minimal. Their lack of engagement and, for some, obvious disinterest in discussion about this music video gave an impression that the young men did not feel the discussion was relevant or relatable to them. The above quote, in which the boys called out 'Slavery!', was the only comment the boys offered during this particular discussion. This offer indicated their interpretation of what some of the girls in the group had previously classified as 'empowerment'.

Conversely, there was one group of mixed gender participants who collectively engaged with great enthusiasm in the discussion. These students were passionate advocates for the rights and visibility of queer and gender diverse young people, and several of the students in the class voiced these identities during the course of discussion. Their concluding analysis of 'Dear Future Husband' captured a particularly insightful interpretation of the gendered subjectivity in the song's relationship narrative:

> 'Look… if you take away the gender, then it's like 'If you treat me right, I'll treat you right and we'll have a good relationship'. Then it's cute and sweet and adorable. But if you look at the fact that she's saying it, and it's how he has to take her out and then she'll stay home and cook and clean and buy groceries, and then he'll go and buy her a ring and material possessions. That sort of thing, it's just reinforcing stereotypes.'

Sluts vs Prudes in 'Literally I Can't'

> Researcher: 'So, what's the 'Literally I Can't' video clip all about?'
> - 'It's about sluts.'
> - 'Not really… it's about girls being really boring and conservative and the boys changing them'

The participants' discussion of the female characters in Redfoo's controversial 'Literally I Can't' essentially presented an interpretation of how well, or how poorly, the women traversed a hierarchy of gender boundaries. When analysing the interactions between the men and women in the clip for 'Literally I Can't', the participants most often began by referring to the women's specific physical properties, such as their clothing, jewellery and hairstyles. The participants described the group of women in the clip who continuously declined the men's advances and offerings using words like 'preppy', 'stuck up', 'rude', and 'prudes'.

The participants in general referred to the women disdainfully, not only for their appearance, but for refusing to participate in the various elements of the party, and for refusing the gestures of the men. The literature is rich with examples of the double standard that heterosexual young women face, wherein young men's pursuit of sex is celebrated, while young women's desire is denigrated (e.g. Hillier et al. 1999; Jackson & Cram 2003; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006). Jackson and Cram (2003) explored the polarising experiences of pressure and shame that young women face when negotiating their developing sexuality, allocated into a frigid/slut dichotomy and feel they cannot win. Holland et al. (2010) similarly described the imbalance of standards placed on young women, predicated on rigid gender constructs which police them with disciplinary labels of either 'slag' or 'frigid'. The participants' interpretation of the women in 'Literally I Can't' appeared to be formed in reference to this discourse, frequently using these labels to classify women based on their sexual performances of femininity. Where sluts transgress and exceed what is appropriately sexual, prudes are not sexual enough. These are based on specific physical properties (in this case short skirts, or pearl necklaces), which act as social signifiers of these transgressions when placed in a context of feminine sexuality. Interestingly, at times these labels were contradicting and used simultaneously, the young people asserting that the women filled both opposing roles:

> 'They're dressed preppy but they've still got that sense of skankiness.'
> 'They look slutty, but when it comes to the lyrics… it's trying to demonstrate that they're slutty but they're frigid as well.'

Contrastingly, while the participants spoke about the female characters at times with disciplinary scrutiny, they also demonstrated insight into the misogyny present in the music video. They described the song's representation of women using terms such as 'sexualised', 'objectified' and

'no voice'. One girl's interpretation spoke to the role of women in music videos in general: 'We're not seen as people, we're seen as a label or object'.

One group, when commenting on the ways in which women were objectified and silenced in 'Literally I Can't', made their own use of the slut/prude dichotomy:

> Researcher: 'So what's the woman's role in this clip?'
> - 'Shut up and be sexy'
> - 'You're like a toy'
> - 'Either you're a prude, or you're a slut'

A sense of complexity and contradiction lay in the way the young people at times both rejected, and reinforced the scrutiny of women's gender performances. The participants spoke passionately about how 'men are always above women', and at times explicitly referred to the objectification and oppression of women present in music videos. However, the women in both video clips were simultaneously held to account on the basis of their appearance or behaviour that did not meet expectations of femininity. When arguing whether Meghan Trainor was being demanding in 'Dear Future Husband', one group labelled her as 'bossy', while another came to the conclusion that she was a 'princess', both gendered insults that shame women's expression of power. One group of girls identified themselves using the word 'feminists' and were vocal in identifying and rejecting themes of misogyny in 'Literally I Can't', however went on to describe the women in the video clip as, '…just really stuck up, and rude'.

Renold and Ringrose (2011) developed the concept of 'schizoid subjectivities' in regards to teen girls' sexualities and desire. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guatarri, they describe how teen girls in particular are positioned to respond to contradicting regulations of their bodies, and thus their sexualities coheres in a 'schizoid formation'. This concept may be applied to the participants' inconsistent and contradicting navigation of the women in these music videos, implying their own 'schizoid' tensions of sexual passivity and desire.

No Consent vs Asking For It in 'Literally I Can't'

> Researcher: 'What is this song about?'
> - 'Partying'
> - 'Consent'
> - 'How she won't put out'
> - 'And then the boys just say, well bad luck'
> - 'And then they just orgy'
> - 'Yeah then they just jump on top of them, haha.'

When interpreting 'Literally I Can't', participants in each group were usually quick to pick up on themes of sexual pressure evident in the video's storyline, where the men repeatedly offer

different types of alcohol to the women who refuse to participate. Some participants noted the lack of consent explicitly, and responded to lyrical content such as 'Girl I know you can, I don't want to hear no', with statements like, 'Oh my god! That just sounds so **bad!**'. These participants appeared to be aware of the themes of implied sexual violence and pressure, explicitly referring to the narrative using the word 'consent', and the men's portrayals as violent and 'sex obsessed'. Other participants were more ambiguous with their language, using phrases such as 'to make them do stuff', and 'to take advantage, maybe', to describe the men's goal with the women. One participant's analysis of the song's narrative exemplified this sense of ambiguity, making it difficult to determine if they were using a coded speech to interpret implied sexual acts, or simply relaying the narrative:

> 'And the girls are like 'nah I don't want to party', and then stuff happens… and they start partying.'

At the same time that the young people noted the absence of consent and lack of voice held by the women in 'Literally I Can't', they also held the women partly accountable, through a discourse of rape culture. Rape culture in practice holds survivors of sexual assault responsible for their actions, and victim blaming refers to women's behaviour such as their clothing, sexually permissive demeanour and being in locations that may increase the likelihood of becoming victims of violence (Rodier & Meagher 2014). The participants exhibited this discourse when questioning why the women in 'Literally I Can't' had been at the party, in the context of the implied sexual violence they experienced from the men:

> - 'Well, they went to the party in the first place…'
> - 'Yeah, why would you go if you 'can't'?'
> 'Like everything they're saying is no, but why would you go somewhere if you didn't want it, if you didn't like anything there?'

While recognising that the men were 'taking advantage' or 'making them do stuff', the participants also highlighted the women's appearance and behaviour:

> 'Yeah like they're asking for it but then they're just teasing you.'
> 'The girls are acting and dressing like they can but they're saying I can't. But they can, they're just choosing not to.'

Participants described the women's clothing using words like 'slutty' and 'skanky', discursive markers of feminine sexual activity and excess. These notions intersect with the boundaries of 'good' femininity, implying the women had contravened innocence and ruptured a 'good' girl's morality. In doing so, the participants perhaps felt justified in coding the women's behaviour as 'asking for it'. The participants saw the women as signifying excess through material agents of femininity – a skirt too short, too much make up, a pearl necklace. Thus they had demonstrated

certain messages about their sexual availability, which could be read through the slut/prude discourse, and coded as ‘asking for it’, ‘teasing’, or ‘dressing like they can’. These codes also support the work of Oosten et al. (2015) on the concept of token resistance, in that the young people believed the women said no but meant yes. The discourse of blame placed on the women in the narrative also echoes the latest Australian research that outlines young people as a key group who excuse violence, and believe women share some responsibility in sexual violence (Harris et al. 2015).

Conclusion

While negotiating adolescence as a magnified period of developing sexual beliefs and gender ideologies, young people engage with music across a range of increasingly available mediums and platforms. Where music videos were one day restricted to viewing by young people on a television in the home, the contemporary intersection of new highly mobile viewing and social devices has reshaped the contextual landscape of video viewing entirely. Personal devices host multiple platforms of content that is increasingly available, and increasingly important to young people. Young people exist in a unique space where their negotiation of gender and sexual norms can be cultivated through digital spaces, which also serve to nurture their relationships with music. The participants in this project demonstrated a powerful grasp on aspects of gendered subjectivity, which they could identify through narratives in two music videos. These included hegemonic portrayals of femininity as consumerist, superficial, marriage obsessed, and sexual pressure as a component of sanctioned masculinity. When presented with gender stereotypes around white middle class women and domestic duties, or men as ferociously sexually driven, young people have the capacity to critically analyse discursive gendered scripts, and reject such themes in the moment. Evaluation of sexualisation and objectification was often clear and disapproving among the young people in this study, which is unsurprising given the discourse in the media, research, and beyond, around female sexualisation in particular genres of music.

However, I interpreted the data as incredibly complex, and at times found the participants’ evaluation of the women in the music videos to be contradicting, paradoxical, or to hold ‘schizoid’ tensions (Renold & Ringrose 2011). While the participants were able to outline the hypercritical lens through which women are viewed in media, they applied this same lens to read and police what was an acceptable performance of femininity. Particularly in their interpretations of women in either accepting or refusing the sexual advances of men, the young people used physical signifiers of femininity to apply disciplinary labels of sexual excess or withholding – the slut vs the prude. Women’s sexual identities in music videos continue to operate from these binaries, and young people make use of these to assign women into either category, or at times in this study, both. These signifiers, labels and codes may assist young people in reasoning that such women are responsible, or ‘asking for it’, supported by a broader social discourse of rape culture and victim blaming.

This study explored how young people continually negotiate gender and sexualities in music video content, and indeed have the capacity to demonstrate their own critical viewing skills. Binary constructions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality are well documented in the literature, and continue to be embedded in young people's interpretations of music video narratives. These revealed themselves in this study through several opposing dichotomies, in which women were either empowered or oppressed, sluts or prudes, gave no consent or were 'asking for it'. As can be heard in the young people's voices, fixtures of feminine sexuality must move beyond these binaries. To stop girls from being held hostage by forces of sexism and contradiction (Little & Hoskins 2004), postfeminism (Gill 2008), or protectionism and victimisation (Ringrose & Renold 2011), we must explore ways of expanding girls' acceptable identities from simply 'good' or 'bad'. Considering young people are the highest consumers of popular music, the primary viewers of music videos, and are already making use of digital and popular media to explore feminist consciousness (Keller et al. 2016), I suggest that popular music offers fertile ground for young people to critically engage with feminist thought, and thus allow for more self-directed evaluation and expansion of acceptable gender and sexual hegemonies.

References

Armstrong, E. A., Hamilton, L. T., Armstrong, E. M., & Seeley, J. L. (2014) '"Good Girls": Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus', *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 77, 100-122

Attenborough, F. (2014) 'Rape is Rare (except when it's not): the Media, Recontextualisation and Violence Against Women'. *Journal of Language, Aggression and Conflict, 2*, 183-203

Bennett, J. (2014) 'How to Reclaim the F-Word? Just Call Beyoncé', *Time Magazine*, [online], 26th August. Available at http://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/. Accessed 13 August 2016.

Blakemore, J. E. O., Berenbaum, S. A., & Liben, L. S. (2013) *Gender Development,* Hoboken: Taylor and Francis

Brooks, D. & Hébert, L. (2006) Gender, Race and Media Representation, In B. J. Dow & J. T. Wood (eds) *SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication*, Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, pp. 297-317

Brown, J. D., Steele, J. R., & Walsh-Childers, K. (2002) *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating Media's Influence on Adolescent Sexuality*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Cheong-Clinch, C. (2009) 'Music for Engaging Young People in Education'. *Youth Studies Australia,* 28, 50-57

Conrad, K., Dixon, T. L., & Zhang, Y. (2009) 'Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A Content Analysis of Rap Music Videos', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 53, 134-156

Conroy, N. E. (2013) 'Rethinking Adolescent Peer Sexual Harassment: Contributions of Feminist Theory', *Journal of School Violence,* 12, 340-356

Dines, G. & Humez M. J. (2015) *Gender, Race and Class in Media: a Critical Reader*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Dennehy, (2014) 'Redfoo Rage: X Factor Should Boot Him for "Sexist" Song Literally I Can't', *Herald Sun* [online], 11th November, Available at http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/confidential/redfoo-rage-x-factor-should-boot-him-for-sexist-song-literally-i-cant/news-story/1886d6163530d25c04de6ca3c904437e. Accessed 13 August, 2015.

Ferrara, L. (1984) 'Phenomenology as a Tool for Musical Analysis', *The musical quarterly,* 70, 355-373

Flood, M., Fergus, L., & Heenan, M. (2009) 'Respectful relationships education: violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools', Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, State of Victoria.

Frisby, C. M., & Aubrey, J. S. (2012) 'Race and Genre in the Use of Sexual Objectification in Female Artists' Music Videos', *Howard Journal of Communications,* 23, 66-87

Froyum, C. M. (2010) 'Making "Good girls": Sexual Agency in the Sexuality Education of Low-Income Black Girls'. *Culture, Health & Sexuality,* 12, 59-72

Gergen, K. (1985) 'The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology', *American Psychologist, 40*, 3, 266-275

Gergen, M. (2001) *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender and Performance,* Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage Publications

Gilchrist, H., & Sullivan, G. (2006) 'The Role of Gender and Sexual Relations for Young People in Identity Construction and Youth Suicide', *Culture, Health & Sexuality,* 8, 195-209

Gill, R. (2008) 'Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times', *Subjectivity*, 25, 432-445

Grusin, R. (2010) *Premeditation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Harris, A., Honey, N., Webster, K., Diemer, K., & Politoff, V. (2015) 'Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community

Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16–24 years'. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Hillier, L., Harrison, L., & Bowditch, K. (1999) '"Neverending Love" and "Blowing Your Load": The Meanings of Sex to Rural Youth'. *Sexualities, 2*, 69-89

Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (2010) 'Deconstructing Virginity - Young People's Accounts of First Sex', *Sexual and Relationships Therapy,* 15, 221-232

Holtzman, L. & Sharpe, L (2014) *Media Messages: What Film, Television and Popular Music Teach us About Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Armonk, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe

hooks, b. (1992) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End Press

Jackson, S. M., & Cram, F. (2003) 'Disrupting the Sexual Double Standard: Young Women's Talk about Heterosexuality', *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 42, 113-127

Jensen, S. Q. (2011) 'Othering, Identity Formation and Agency', *Qualitative Studies*, 2, 63-78

Keishin Armstrong, J. (2016) 'Taylor Swift's feminist evolution', *billboard*, [online], 1st July. Available at http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/7423962/taylor-swift-feminism-impact. Accessed 13 August 2016.

Keller, J., Mendes, K. & Ringrose, J. (2016) 'Speaking "Unspeakable" Things: Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Published online: 28 July 2016. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511. Accessed 13 August 2016.

Klein, E. (1997) *Ending Domestic Violence: Changing Public Perceptions/Halting the Epidemic*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Kristler, M. E., & Lee, M. J. (2009) 'Does Exposure to Sexual Hip-Hop Music Videos Influence the Sexual Attitudes of College Students?', *Mass Communication and Society,* 13, 67-86

Little, N. J., & Hoskins, M. L. (2004) '"It's an Acceptable Identity": Constructing "Girl" at the Intersections of Health, Media, and Meaning Making', *Child & Youth Services,* 26, 75-93

McFerran, K., & Wigram, T. (2005) 'Articulating the Dynamics of Music Therapy Group Improvisations', *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy,* 14, 33-46

McRobbie, A. (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change,* London: SAGE Publications

Moloney, M. E., & Pelehach, L. (2014) '"You're Not Good Enough": Teaching Undergraduate Students about the Sexualization of Girls and Women', *Teaching Sociology,* 42, 119-129

Morgan, D. (1997) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications

Oosten, J. M. F. v., Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2015) 'The Influence of Sexual Music Videos on Adolescents' Misogynistic Beliefs: the Role of Video Content, Gender, and Affective Engagement', *Communication Research,* 7, 986-1001

Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety and VicHealth (2015) 'Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence women and their children in Australia' [online], 2015. Available at https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/0aa0109b-6b03-43f2-85fe-a9f5ec92ae4e/Change-the-story-framework-prevent-violence-women-children-AA-new.pdf.aspx. Accessed 13th August 2016.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015) *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics,* New York, NY Oxford University Press

Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2007) 'Adolescents' Exposure to a Sexualised Media Environment and their Notions of Women as Sex Objects', *Sex Roles,* 56, 381-395

Play n Skillz (2014) 'Literally I Can't': London Alley Ent. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NCHE1sGy80. Accessed 15 Nov 2015.

Primack, B. A., Gold, M. A., Schwartz, E. B. & Dalton, M. A. (2008) 'Degrading and Non-Degrading Sex in Popular Music: A Content Analysis', *Public Health Rep*, 123, Sep-Oct, 593-600

Renold, E. & Ringrose, J. (2011) 'Schizoid Subjectivities? Re-theorizing Teen Girls' Sexual Cultures in an Era of Sexualisation', *Journal of Sociology,* 47, 389-409

Retallack, H, Ringrose, J., & Lawrence, E. (2016) 'Fuck Your Body Image: Teen Girls' Twitter and Instagram Feminism in and Around School, in J. Coffey, S. Budgeon and H. Cahill (eds), *Learning Bodies: the Body in Youth and Childhood Studies*, Singapore: Springer, pp. 85-103

Ringrose, J. (2013) *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*, Oxford and New York: Routledge

Roberts, D. F. & Foehr, U. G. (2008) 'Trends in Media Use', *Future Child*, 18, Spring, 11-37

Rodier, K., & Meagher, M. (2014) 'In Her Own Time: Rihanna, Post-Feminism, and Domestic Violence', *Women,* 25, 176-193

Ruud, E. (1997) 'Music and Identity', *Nordisk tidsskrift for musikkterapi/Nordic Journal of Music Therapy,* 6, 3-13

Saarikallio, S., Gold, C., & McFerran, K. (2015) 'Development and Validation of the Healthy-Unhealthy Music Scale'. *Child And Adolescent Mental Health,* 20, 210-217

Schilt, K & Westbrook, L. (2009) '"Gender Normals", Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality'. *Gender and Society*, 23, August, 440-464

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2nd Ed), Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Tan, M. (2014) 'Redfoo Under Fire Over Misogynist Song Literally I Can't', *The Guardian* [online], 12th November, Available at https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/12/redfoo-under-fire-misogynist-song-literally-i-cant. Accessed 13 August 2016.

Toomey, R. B., McGuire, J. K. & Russell, S. T. (2012) 'Heteronormativity, School Climates, and Perceived Safety for Nonconforming Peers'. *Journal of Adolescence, 35,* February, 187-196

Trainor, M. (2015) 'Dear Future Husband': Epic Records. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShlW5plD_40. Accessed 15 Nov 2015.

VicHealth (2010) 'National community attitudes towards violence against women survey 2009. Changing cultures, changing attitudes - preventing violence against women', Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

Ward, L. M. (2003) 'Understanding the Role of Entertainment Media in the Sexual Socialisation of American Youth: A Review of the Empirical Research', *Developmental Review,* 23, 347-388

Ward, L. M., Hansbrough, E., & Walker, E. (2005) 'Contributions of Music Video Exposure to Black Adolescents' Gender and Sexual Schemas', *Journal of Adolescent Research,* 20, 143-166

West, C & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987) 'Doing Gender' *Gender and Society,* 1, June, 125-151

WHO, Department of Reproductive Health and Research (2013) 'Global and regional estimates of violence against women' [online], 2013. Available at http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf?ua=1. Accessed 13th August 2016.

White, M. (2011) *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Elly Scrine is a graduate researcher at the University of Melbourne, Australia. As a music therapist specialising in working with adolescents, Elly's PhD examines the role of music therapy in exploring young people's lived experiences of gender, power and violence. Based in the high school setting, Elly's research looks at how discourses of risk and deprivation are used to uphold colonial, raced, heterosexualised, gendered and classed exclusionary processes with young people, and how anti-oppressive approaches to music therapy practice can support young people on the margins.

Email: ellyscrine@gmail.com

Camping Outside the Magic Kingdom's Gates: The Power of Femslash in the Disney Fandom

Kodi Maier, *University of Hull*

ABSTRACT

Walt Disney Studios has long been considered the curator and creator of the American fairy tale canon, establishing the tacit narratives that reflect the United States' unique set of values, which are then disseminated throughout the Western world. As such, the fairy tales, myths, and legends the studio chooses to animate have enormous influence in arbitrating who does and does not belong in Western society. Because Disney's canon representation of queer women in these narratives has been non-existent, many queer female fans feel they are othered, obscured, and erased in real life. Not content to simply wait for such recognition, these Disney fans have rallied together to create their own positive representation, lovingly cutting and stitching characters from Disney's animated texts to create femslash narratives that satisfy their desire to see themselves reflected in the films they love. In other words, in a society that rejects and discriminates against queer female relationships, Disney femslash fans poach Disney's animated canon in order to create a space that validates their queer identities.

KEYWORDS

Disney, Walt Disney Studios, Fandom, Femslash, Disney Femslash

Introduction

When asked about the power of representation in literature, Junot Díaz said, 'There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves' (Donohue 2009). So it is in mainstream media: those who are not cis, straight, white, or Christian are so frequently denied accurate and positive representation in film, television, and literature that they are transformed into a collective of monsters. Unwilling to passively wait for their peers to recognize their humanity, these othered groups have forged their own spaces where they can create and share content that legitimises their identities. The Disney femslash fandom, a group of fans who imagine animated Disney female characters in queer relationships, is one such space. Given fairy tales' power to define society and Disney's position as the curator/sometimes creator of those fairy tales, the poaching practices of the fandom are particularly powerful. By reworking Disney animated films and characters into fan fiction (also known as fanfic), gifs, moodboards, and other media, the Disney femslash community is able to carve out a place for themselves within Disney's Magic Kingdom and thus society at large.

Ethics, Methodology, and Limitations

This article is by no means a comprehensive survey of the entire Disney femslash fandom, which, like other fandoms, spans numerous demographics and digital platforms, including blogs, forums, fan wikis, photo and video sharing sites, file sharing sites, and social media platforms (Deller 2015 ¶ 1.3). Instead, it is meant to be a spring-board for further inquiry, employing personal interviews and participant observation to broadly sketch the motives and methods of the Disney femslash fandom.

Certain assumptions about the Disney femslash fandom are in place, namely that the group discussed self-identifies as queer and female. It is never possible to account for every member of any given fandom, especially on Tumblr where the boundaries are 'loose and informal' and fans 'are part of the fandom when they feel they are' (Deller 2015 ¶3.3 – 3.4). However, 'qualitative scholarship […], informal surveys, community self-definition, and […] informal observations suggest that it is accurate to say that an overwhelming majority of active participants in femslash fandom identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer women' (Ng and Russo 2017 ¶ 2.8). This is corroborated to some extent through interviewees' self-identification. It is these fans' perspective that will be discussed herein.

Although Tumblr is not the only watering hole for femslash fans, as fan activity tends to bleed across various digital platforms, primary source material was collected solely from Tumblr due to its reputation as the 'fandom platform du jour' (Deller 2015 ¶ 1.5). It is on Tumblr that Disney femslash fans gather to share gifs, photo edits, mood boards, headcanons (noncanonical ideas about a text that the fan nevertheless accepts as true), video edits, fan fiction, and other original works. Given the issues surrounding Tumblr as a public/private platform, consent is a crucial part of any work in Fan Studies (Jones 2015). In light of this, interviewees were located through a post on the author's personal Tumblr: the author generated a call for participants that tagged prominent Disney femslash fandom members, which was then reblogged through a series of signal boosts. Fans who wished to discuss their practices in detail were further invited to privately message the author through Tumblr's messaging system. All participants cited in this article have consented to be quoted and to have their Tumblr accounts referenced throughout the piece. Other primary source material was gathered through searches of the 'Disney femslash' tag on Tumblr between November 2015 and July 2017. In the instances where consent to share material was not explicitly given, screenshots were taken of the material with the username blacked out in order to anonymise the content and prioritise the fan's privacy. Quoted material is edited for clarity, specifically capitalisation and punctuation.

Barred from the Magic Kingdom: Disney's Lack of Queer Representation

According to Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 'femslash communities have been leaders in positioning themselves as a critical counterpublic with an investment in shifting the dominant terms of representation. This stance was an organic outgrowth of fan activity precisely because of the privileged correspondence between being queer women and transforming queer female characters, which animated an imperative to see

oneself reflected on screen' (2017 ¶ 2.6). In other words, there is an element of activism in femslash creative endeavours, with queer female fans outwardly pushing to see themselves represented on screen even as they produce the representation they crave. As Kate, a writer at *Autostraddle.com*, states, 'femslash is written by those whose identities and personal narratives are reflected in the stories themselves. [...] That queer author has two girls fall in love with each other in her story even if they're straight in the original work because two girls falling in love means something to her and to so many people like her, and it's important that she sees herself in a work of media whose canon forgets she exists. One of the great frustrations of LGBTQ media is the fact that so little of our representations end up coming from LGBTQ-identified creators, and thus we see inaccurate portrayals with limited diversity. Femslash exists because we were sick of being told we didn't exist, so we wrote ourselves into their stories' (2014).

Providing positive representation for members of the LGBTQ+ community is not solely Disney's responsibility, and indeed, media creators outside queer fandom are making strides in generating better representation. In their annual report on LGBTQ+ representation in Hollywood, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) states, 'As recent successful animated films and TV programs have shown (Oscar-nominated *Paranorman*, Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe*), LGBT people appearing in 'all-ages' programming – animated or not – is not the impossible notion it once was' (*Studio Responsibility Index* 2016, 24). Elsewhere, independent artists are turning to crowdfunding to help fund, publish, and disseminate their works. Comic anthologies like *Valor* (a collection of re-written or updated fairy tales that centres on heroic, cunning, strong, and often queer female characters) and films like *Happy Birthday, Marsha* (a movie that focuses on Marsha "Pay it No Mind" Johnson, one of the transgender activists who ignited the Stonewall Riots) all help to fill the void in mainstream media representation.

However, Disney is more than a highly influential entertainment giant. According to film scholar Sean Griffin, 'Disney consciously cornered the market on producing animated versions of fairy tales – so much so that literary critics at times have complained that Disney's version of certain fairy tales have completely supplanted the literary texts from which the films were derived' (2000, 62). It is through fairy tales and myth that individuals learn how to function in society and it is Disney who controls the American fairy tale canon. With this canon of animated fairy tales, 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. Hurley corroborates this claim: 'Fairy tales […] have an important role to play in shaping the self-image and belief system of children' (2005, 221), who 'tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story rather than the "classic" version to which they may or may not have been exposed through school or home' (2005, 222). She further states, 'Not only does the Disney version provide visual images for the fairy tale it is depicting, these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images are then translated into beliefs children hold about status in particular group membership, in relation to notions of good, bad, pretty, and ugly as reflected in the films' (2005, 222).

Given Disney's power and influence, the egregious lack of queer representation in the Magic Kingdom means LGBTQ+ individuals are effectively locked out of Western society, leaving many eager to be officially recognised in the studio's animated canon. Disney fans on Tumblr have repeatedly expressed this need for recognition from Disney, both through community-produced content and in personal interviews. The Tumblr *Walt Disney Confessions* (http://waltdisneyconfessions.tumblr.com/) operates much like Frank Warren's famous PostSecret project. Fans are encouraged to anonymously share their hopes, dreams, wishes, disappointments, annoyances, and other Disney-related thoughts in the 'About the Blog' section, which reads: 'Welcome to Walt Disney Confessions! Here people can confess their innermost Disney thoughts. This blog seeks to unite Disney fans and have them connect over shared experiences or feelings they may have had through Disney. Who knows, someone may be keeping the same dark secret as you' (http://waltdisneyconfessions.tumblr.com/). Since *Walt Disney Confessions* started in August 2011, numerous fans have confessed their desire for a lesbian or bisexual Disney princess. Indeed, one of the first confessions posted on the site simply states, 'I wish Disney would make a lesbian Disney Princess.' **[Figure 1]** Another confessor elaborates: 'I am convinced both Merida and Elsa are lesbians. Mostly because I am desperately waiting for Disney to make a lesbian princess. I want all little girls to know that they can have a happy ending. Even if theirs is with another princess' **[Figure 2]**, while yet another says, 'I wish Disney had a lesbian princess/queen. I am lesbian and it is very hard for me to relate to any of the Disney Princess movies.' **[Figure 3]** A fourth confession reads, 'Growing up bisexual, I always wished for a Disney Princess that was like me' **[Figure 4]**. While the anonymity of these confessions makes details such as gender identity, sexuality, and fandom/fannish practices impossible to know, the fact that other Tumblrs dedicated to Disney femslash reblog and/or 'like' these particular confessions shows their desires are shared, on some level, by those in the Disney femslash fandom.

Figure 1: Disney confession wishing for a lesbian princess.

Figure 2: Disney confession on Elsa's and Merida's lesbian sexuality.

Figure 3: Another Disney confession hoping for a lesbian princess.

Figure 4: A Disney confession wishing for a bisexual princess.

This desire for a queer princess in Disney's Magic Kingdom has been further echoed in personal interviews with Disney femslash fans and shippers (fans who support certain sexual or romantic character pairings, also known as 'ships'), who often attribute their participation in the fandom or their support of certain ships to this lack in representation. One bisexual fan, Sam, said, 'I'm not super involved in the fandom, per se, as I don't really create stuff but I admire all the art and the fics that are created by people inspired by LGBT princesses. I really hope they give Elsa a girlfriend in *Frozen 2* because I think it's time little LGBT girls have a romance they can look up to. I know I wish I did growing up' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Femslash writer Allison takes this desire one step further, echoing Griffin and Hurley's views on Disney as the curator of Western fairy tales. According to her, 'Disney is a modern Grimm,' who heavily influences 'how these later generations see fairy tales, at least especially in the western culture' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Thus, Allison enthusiastically attributed her participation in the Disney femslash fandom 'to the fact that THERE ARE NO QUEER FAIRY TALES[.] Not in mainstream culture, at least' (Personal correspondence 10 April 2017). A third anonymous individual who runs a Disney femslash Tumblr concurred, saying they 'got into Disney femslash because I'm both a lesbian and a huge Disney lover. I wanted to be able to relate more to the characters, so I looked up Disney femslash and found an entire fandom' (Personal correspondence, November 2015).

Slash and Ships: Disney Femslash and DIY Fairy Tales

Femslash, then, allows queer female Disney fans to create their own fairy tales, thus filling the lacuna of queer female representation in Disney's Magic Kingdom and, by extension, society. Sean Griffin argues that because queer individuals are often 'denied the ability to openly produce texts dealing with homosexuality (through both law and economic means),

the emergent gay and lesbian culture often [relies] on its ability to appropriate texts from the dominant heterosexual hegemony' (2000, 50). Griffin continues, 'Due to the relative lack of texts explicitly dealing with homosexuality, enjoying a text from a lesbian or gay viewpoint often requires selecting out the scene, image or section from the text that suits the individual's needs and discarding the rest' (2000, 50). Femslash takes this poaching process[1] one step further by using the isolated elements – here, the female Disney characters fans identify with or idolise – and splicing them together to create fan fiction, fan art, gif sets, fan videos, moodboards, and other media.[2] These works in turn result in the wholly queer Disney narratives that femslash fans crave. As one fan states, 'Crossover Disney femslash vids on YouTube are better lesbian representation than any TV show has come up with in the last, like, 10 years.' **[Figure 5]**

Figure 5: A Disney femslash fan comments on the quality of represetation in YouTube fan videos.

Like slash fiction, Disney femslash narratives do feature sexually explicit content between characters. However, an overwhelming amount of femslash narratives focus on the dynamics of the pairing, imagining an environment in which characters can engage with one another on a deeply personal level. One anonymous interviewee, herein referred to as SW, noted that she shipped Moana from *Moana* (2016) and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) 'because they're so close in age and would have so much to talk about' (Personal correspondence 1 August 2017), i.e. Moana is the daughter of a Polynesian chieftain who leaves home to explore the ocean and Ariel is a mermaid princess who leaves home to explore the world of humans. The Ariel/Moana ship, also known as Moariel, is more recent than other pairings, but has quickly grown in popularity. In her interview, Sam stated that she supports the ship 'because the fan art […] made me fall in love with these two young girls who both have a connection with water and also just want more than what they currently have' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Other Moariel fans confirm this connection, calling the heroines 'water girlfriends' and 'ocean girlfriends', and frequently depicting the two sitting on the sand, cuddling and kissing, swimming together in the water, or exploring the ocean with Moana on her canoe and Ariel swimming next to her. **[Figure 6]**

[1] For an in-depth discussion on textual poaching, please see *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins, New York and London: Routledge, 2013.
[2] It is important to note that not every fan chooses to publicly share their works on Tumblr. Some fans create such pieces strictly for their own pleasure. More often fans participate in a certain fandom by reblogging certain posts, thereby curating and disseminating the content they support/enjoy.

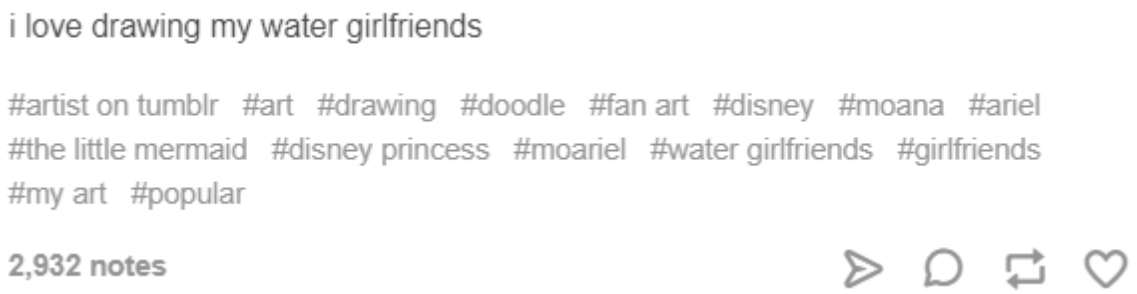

Figure 6: An artist refers to Moariel as 'water girlfriends'.

Other femslash ships function much in the same way. SW explained her love for 'Belsa' (Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* [1991] and Elsa from *Frozen* [2013]) by saying, 'I think they'd have a lot in common – they're both bookish introverts, old souls. They have difficult pasts that they've overcome. They're both extremely smart and creative. I think Belle's kindness and her ability to genuinely empathise with Elsa's feelings of isolation and abnormality would allow her to move past Elsa's defenses and build a friendship that would eventually lead to love'. This dynamic features strongly in SW's Disney university alternate universe fanfic, with other relationships coming into play. She explained, 'Some of the storylines follow their original films fairly closely, like *Frozen*. Instead of ice powers, of course, Elsa is trying desperately to hide her sexuality. Esmeralda, Jane, and Tarzan all end up in a polyamorous relationship. […] Kuzco is genderfluid and in a relationship with Kronk. And then Aurora and Merida end up together – Merida is [asexual] but not [aromantic], Aurora is demisexual' (Personal correspondence 1 August 2017).[3] SW's fic is particularly notable not just because it fills the gap in queer representation in Disney's canon of films, but because she reimagines the majority of the Disney characters she uses as queer. In other words, Disney's dearth is not just filled with one or two lesbian pairings but answered with an abundance of queer characters. Thus, SW uses femslash to reimagine a society where queer individuals are not merely minorities who must fight to be recognized, but are as normal and plentiful and human as their heterosexual counterparts.

Such headcanons and fanfics are powerful, but the visual work (i.e. gifs, fan videos, and moodboards) takes fanfic's textual poaching to an entirely new level. These visuals are extraordinarily creative in their manipulation of Disney's visual texts, splicing and editing Disney heroines and princesses from vastly different films to imagine the favoured pairing as they exchange intimate looks, 'come hither' smiles, and tender embraces. Gif sets are particularly popular, functioning like short comics that depict glimpses into the ship's relationship. One Moariel gif set is comprised of two gifs: one with Ariel, who is in the water, waving at Moana on shore, and a second where Ariel turns to meet Moana's eyes. Ariel's ecstatic waving in the first gif and Moana's expression of quiet yet touched surprise in the second gif create the sense that they are sharing a tender moment that either could or

[3] Characters listed here feature in the following Disney animated films: Esmeralda – *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), Tarzan and Jane - *Tarzan* (1999), Kuzco and Kronk - *Emperor's New Groove* (2000), Aurora – *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Merida – *Brave* (2012).

already has blossomed into a romantic relationship. **[Figure 7]** That Ariel and Moana are from two different films, not to mention two different animated mediums, may limit Moariel fans' visual resources, but it does not ultimately limit the power of the ship.

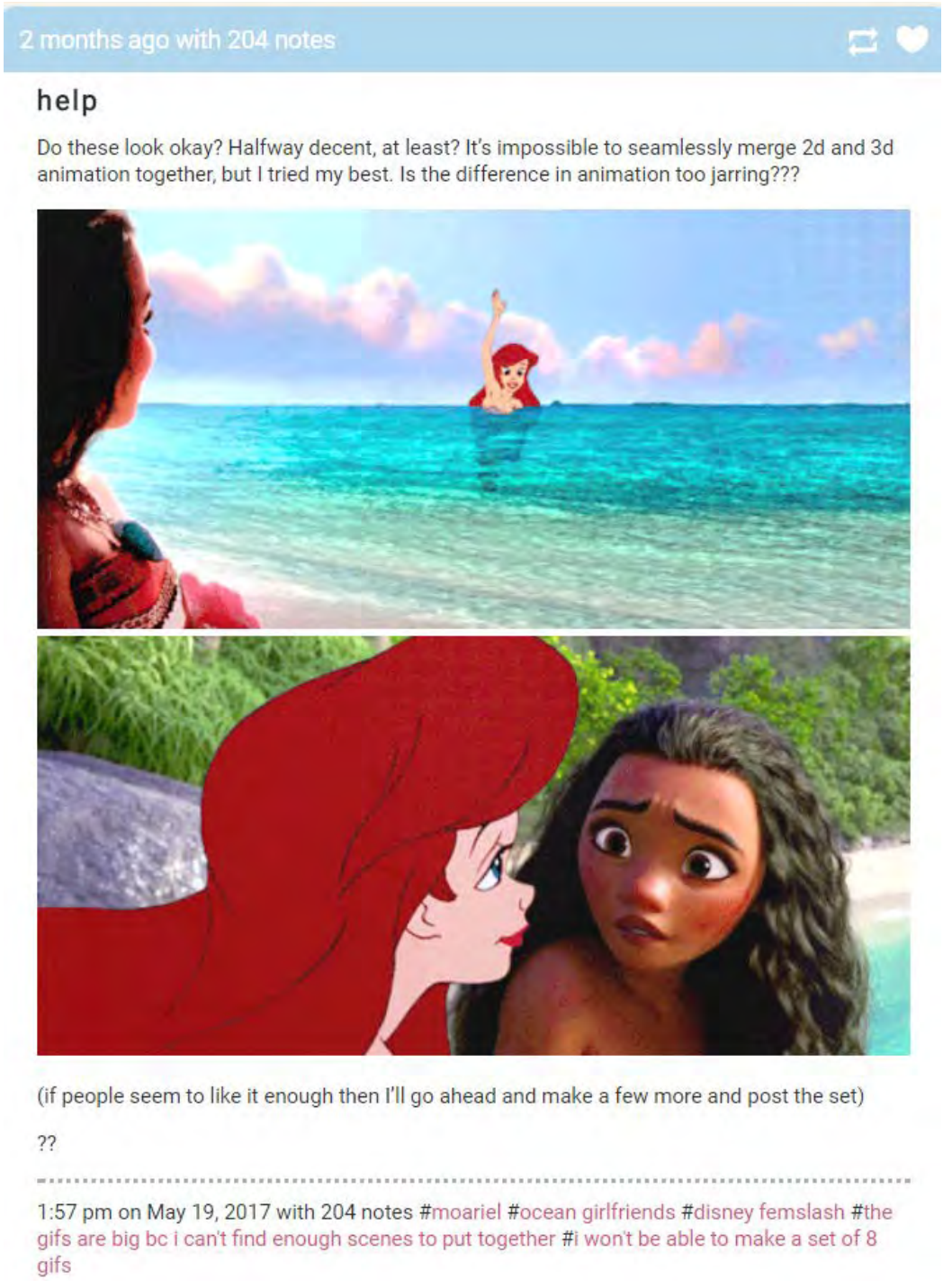

Figure 7: A Moariel gif set.

Gif sets like the Moariel example previously mentioned are common in the Disney femslash fandom, and are usually accompanied by bits of text to further elaborate on the scenes depicted. A second set of gifs on another post shows two scenes where Ariel and Princess

Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) make eye contact. Like the Moariel set, the scenes are edited in such a way that their looks are quiet, shy, but still convey a sense of love and affection. These images effectively communicate the moments Ariel and Kida share, yet the creator further elaborates, fleshing out the relationship the two princesses might enjoy together. According to the creator, Kida and Ariel would be perfect for each other because '[o]ne of Ariel's strongest traits is her need to learn things. She's pretty much a self-taught amateur anthropologist', while 'Kida has lived for a very long time, she possesses knowledge gained over the course of 8 thousand+ years. Think of what she could teach Ariel!' **[Figure 8]**

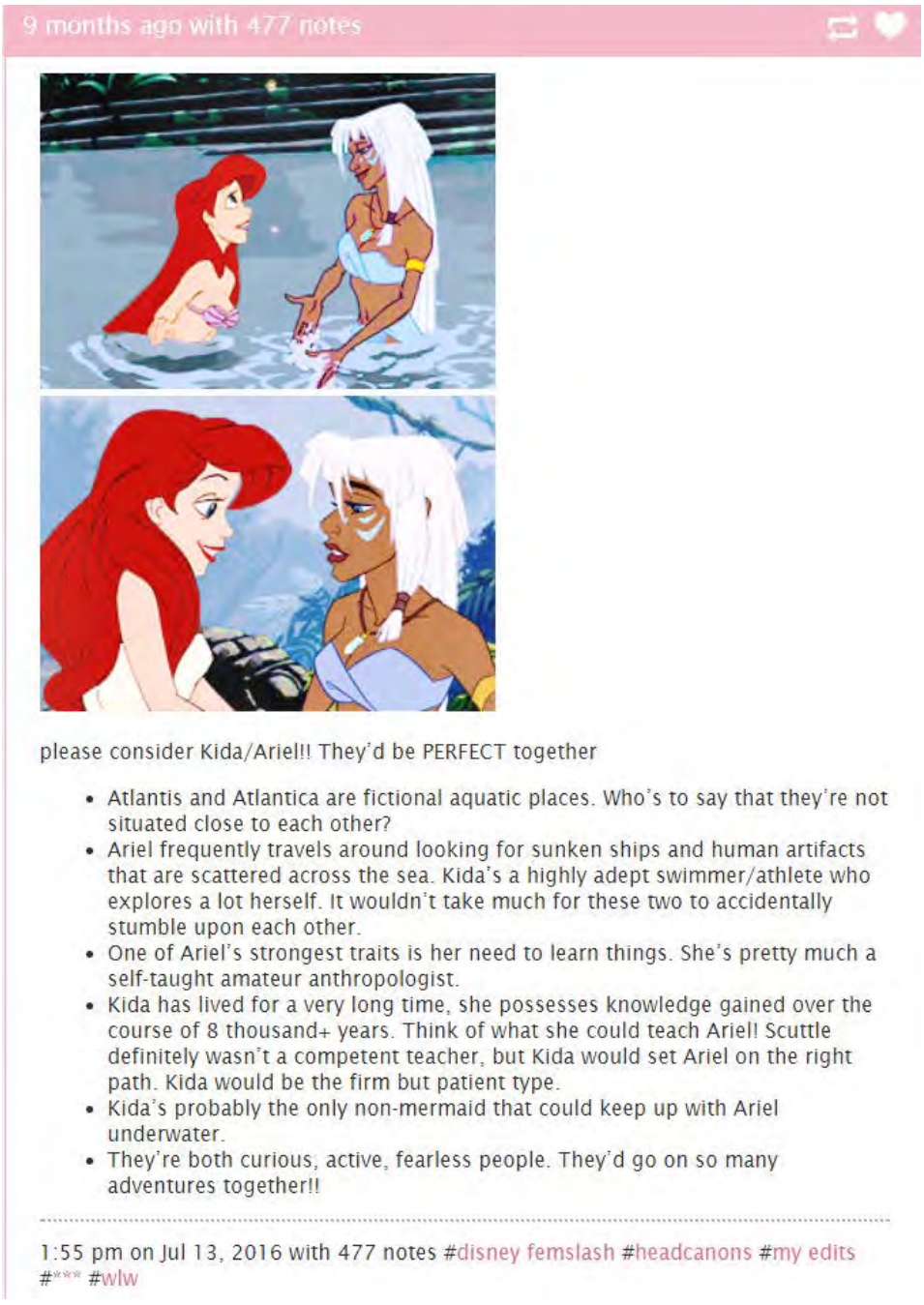

Figure 8: Ariel and Kida headcanon.

In her article on fan-made femslash videos, Julie Levin Russo notes that femslash video creators essentially don 'slash goggles', metaphoric lenses that open up 'a queer mode of viewing that interfaces with television's contradictions, excesses, gaps, and fragments', enabling fans to 'fix the myopic heteronormativity of mainstream representation' (2017 ¶ 1.2). According to Russo, vidders exist 'somewhere between the reality of simply watching (even with corrective lenses in place) and the virtual reality of an original universe, [augmenting] their source with a layer of interpretation that wouldn't be visible to the naked eye' (2017 ¶ 1.3). Vidding, then, allows femslash fans to share their queer, remixed visions of their favourite franchises; the resultant creations thus becoming the slash goggles by which their audience can experience the creator's queer vision. Russo may be discussing video-editing practices in femslash overall, but her analysis neatly maps onto the Disney femslash fandom's gif editing practices and creations. Despite Disney's insistence that these princesses and heroines remain separated – characters included in the official Disney Princess franchise do not make eye contact or interact with each other either in the merchandise or other materials (Orenstein 2006) – femslash fans freely poach and splice Disney's animated texts into brief gif sets, allowing their followers and fellow fans to more fully engage in their queer reimaginings of the Magic Kingdom. This collective vision, made tangible through giffing, arguably splinters and reconfigures Disney's reality, carving out a space where queer female pairings can thrive.

Some fans do not utilise images, clips, or characters from the Disney films. Instead, they create collages, called 'moodboards', to evoke the personalities and emotions related to their favorite ship. One such moodboard includes images of mermaids, beaches, oceans, and women with long red and blonde hair kissing to evoke the relationship Ariel might share with Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010). **[Figure 9]** Another Tumblr user combines pictures of mermaids, the ocean, volcanos, tropical flowers, and seashells to conjure the Moariel ship. **[Figure 10]** In another moodboard, the same fan uses picturesque villages, a figure in a powder-blue cloak on a white horse, gargoyles, cathedrals, rococo ceiling art, and two women kissing to suggest Belle's relationship with Esmeralda. **[Figure 11]**

Figure 9: Ariel and Rapunzel Moodboard**.**

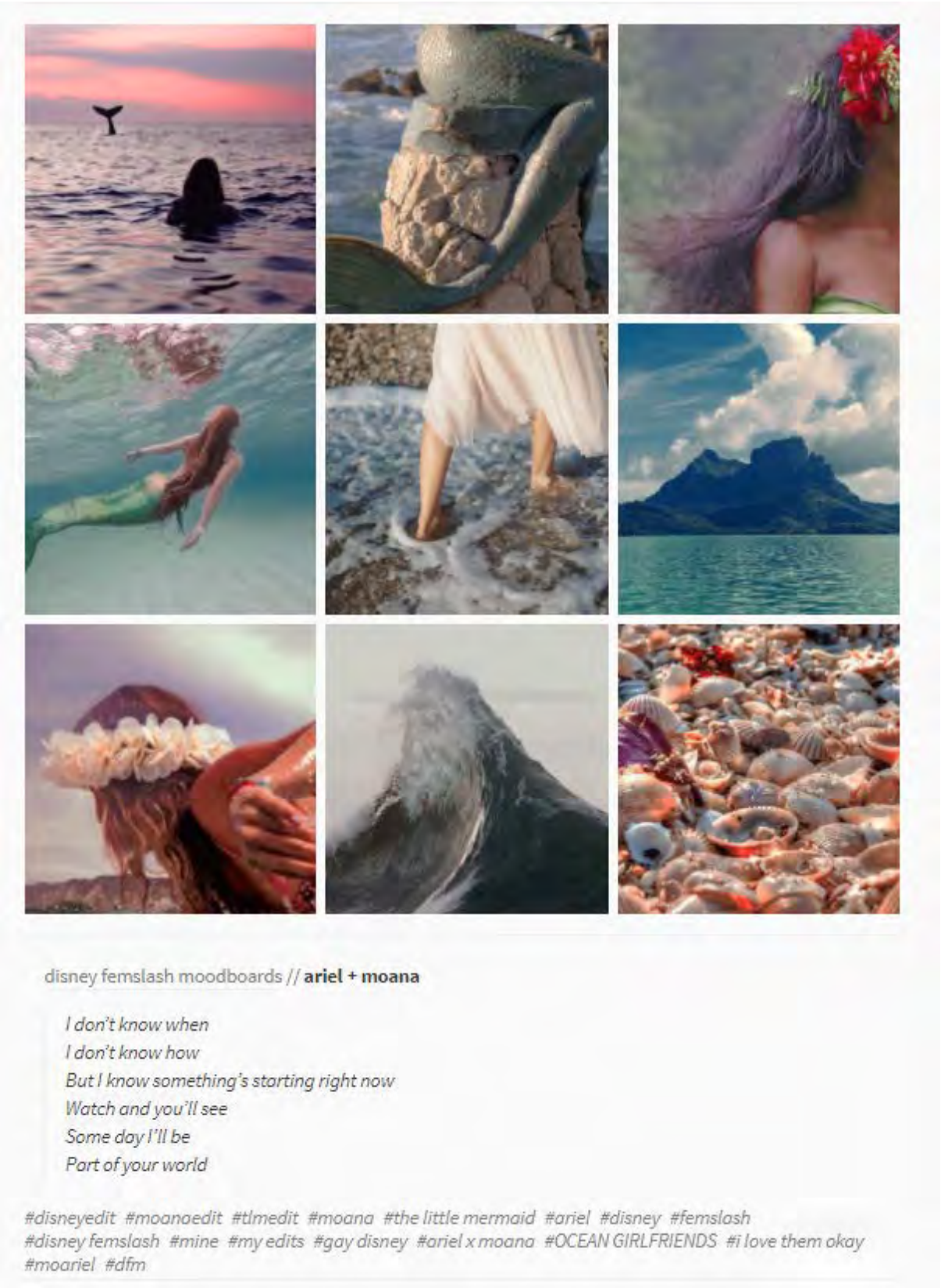

Figure 10: Moariel Moodboard**.**

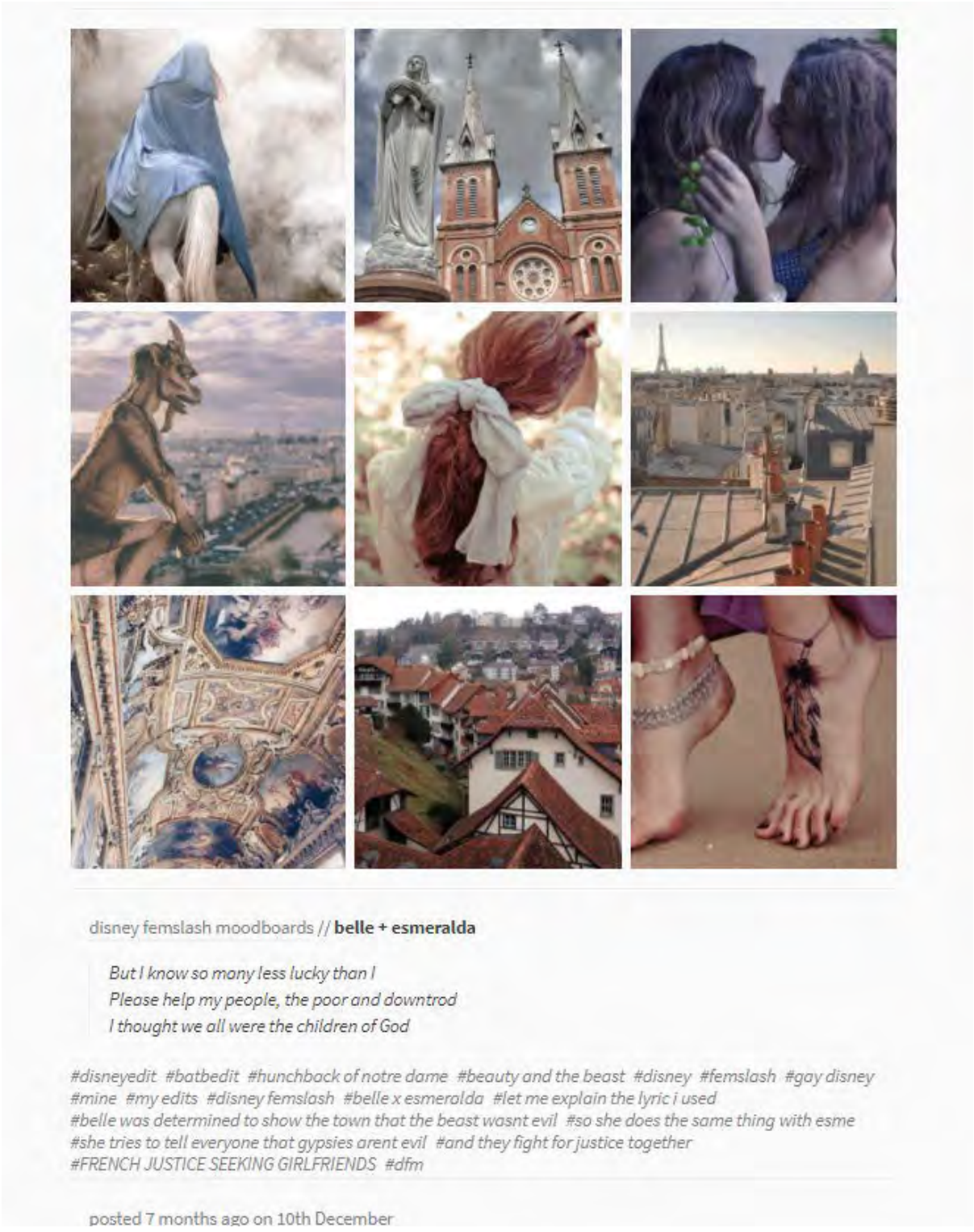

Figure 11: Belle x Esmeralda moodboard.

Each of these boards draws on different aspects of the princesses/heroines and their stories – Ariel's ocean home, Rapunzel's long hair, the lush, tropical islands that Moana explores, the provincial town where Belle grew up, the Notre Dame cathedral that acts as a stunning backdrop to Esmeralda's story – to wordlessly tell stories of romance, shared interests, and

shared histories. Thus, even if the Disney femslash fandom did not have access to the source material, they would still find ways to create and share the fairy tales they crave.

Conclusion

Although Disney has yet to feature a queer female heroine in its fairy tale canon, that does not deter queer Disney femslash fans from poaching Disney texts in order to create fairy tales that legitimise their place in society. Through poaching, cutting, and splicing female characters from Disney's animated canon, these Sapphic fans are re-joining Disney's conservative silence with boundless creativity. In these new Disney fairy tales queer identities are no longer monstrous but commonplace, normal, and utterly human. So long as Walt Disney Studios remains silent on queer female representation in their animated films, the femslash fandom will continue to camp outside the Magic Kingdom's gates.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the insights Bethan Jones and Milena Popova have provided for this article, as well as for the comments and knowledge shared by the article's reviewers. Thanks also goes out to the Disney femslash fandom for sharing their creativity and experiences with me. A final thanks goes to Annie Maier and Charlie Ward – I love you both.

References

Deller, R. (2015) 'Simblr Famous and SimSecret Infamous: Performance, Community Norms, and Shaming among Fans of *The Sims*', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 18, [online]. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0615. Accessed 29 July 2017.

Donohue, B. (2009) 'Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Diaz tells students his story', *NJ.com*, [online], 21 October. Available at http://www.nj.com/ledgerlive/index.ssf/2009/10/junot_diazs_new_jersey.html. Accessed 7 April 2017.

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2016) '2016 Studio Responsibility Index', [online], 2 May. Available at http://www.glaad.org/sri/2016. Accessed 10 April 2017.

Griffin, S. (2000) *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*, New York and London: New York University Press.

Hurley, D. L. (2005) 'Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess', *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 74 no. 3, 221–232, [online]. Available at www.jstor.org/stable/40027429. Accessed 9 April 2017.

Jenkins, H. (2013) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York and London: Routledge.

Jones, B. (2015) *Aca-fan Research on Fannish Sites: Ethical and Moral Challenges to Using Social Media*, [online]. Available at https://bethanvjones.wordpress.com/2015/04/03/aca-fan-research-on-fannish-sites-ethical-and-moral-challenges-to-using-social-media/. Accessed 30 July 2017.

Kate (2014) 'Femslash Can Save the World if We Let It', *Autostraddle.com*, [online]. Available at https://www.autostraddle.com/femslash-can-save-the-world-if-we-let-it-246684/. Accessed 30 July 2017.

Ng, E. and Russo, J. L. (2017) 'Envisioning Queer Female Fandom', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 24, [online]. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.1168. Accessed 29 July 2017.

Orenstein, P. (2006) 'What's Wrong with Cinderella?', *The New York Times*, [online]. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html. Accessed 03 August 2017.

Russo, J. L. (2017) 'Femslash Goggles: Fan Vids with Commentary by Creators', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 24, [online]. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.1026. Accessed 29 July 2017.

@waltdisneyconfessions [blog]. Available at www.waltdisneyconfessions.tumblr.com. Accessed 03 August 2017.

Filmography

Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001). Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Beauty and the Beast (1991). Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Brave (2012). Directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. USA: Pixar.
The Emperor's New Groove (2000). Directed by Mark Dindal. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Frozen (2013). Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. USA: Walt Disney Studios.
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996). Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

The Little Mermaid (1989). Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Moana (2016). Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Mulan (1998). Directed by Barry Crook and Tony Bancroft. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

The Princess and the Frog (2009). Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Sleeping Beauty (1959). Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Les Clark, Eric Larson, and Wolfgang Reitherman. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Tangled (2010). Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Tarzan (1999). Directed by Kevin Lima and Chris Buck. USA: Walt Disney Studios.

Kodi Maier is a PhD candidate at the University of Hull, researching the Disney Princess franchise. They have contributed to a number of independent and academic publications, including the Society for Animation Studies blog and GEEKED magazine. They also recently mounted a symposium sponsored by the Societ for Animation Studies on concepts of queerness within animation called "Queer/ing Animation" (www.facebook.com/queeringanimation).

Email: L.M.Maier@2013.hull.ac.uk

The Hidden Sex: Representations of Intersex People in Circus and Sideshow Novels

NAOMI FRISBY, *Sheffield Hallam University*

ABSTRACT
Despite being the hidden sex in society, intersex people with ambiguous genitalia are visible in a number of circus and sideshow novels. These characters are often used as plot devices, performing a stable gender identity whilst concealing their intersex status for the sake of the plot. They are portrayed as deceptive and licentious, their identities placing them outside of the sex and gender binaries and leaving them dehumanised. It is only in *Pantomime* by Laura Lam that the possibility of an alternative portrayal is glimpsed, although questions regarding the sex and gender binaries and non-normative sexuality remain.

KEYWORDS
Intersex, Gender, Performativity, Sexuality, Literature

Introduction

The US publishing industry came under scrutiny in 2015 due its failure to offer a true reflection of the society in which we live. A 'Diversity Baseline Survey' (2015) conducted by the publisher Lee & Low Books sought to explain why, in the past twenty years, the number of diverse books published in the USA never exceeded an average of 10%. The authors of the survey drew a correlation between the high percentage of white (80), cis (98.7), heterosexual (88.2), non-disabled (92.8) people working in the publishing industry and the lack of broad representation in published books.

One genre in which we might expect to find a diverse range of characters is circus and sideshow literature. The circus has been seen as a safe space for those who fall outside of mainstream society, particularly those with non-normative bodies[1]. However, the desire to create a narrative that maintains a mainstream reader's interest and provides a shocking denouement means writers often use marginalised people to provide entertainment.

Three American contemporary circus novels include intersex characters who are key to the plot: *The Bearded Lady* by Sharlee Dieguez (1999) tells the story of Jess who, after the deaths of her parents, runs away and joins the circus. There she meets equestrian Marion Des Cartes and falls in love. *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno* by Ellen Bryson (2010) is set in a fictionalised version of P.T. Barnum's

1 The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper.

American Museum. Bartholomew Fortuno tells the story of bearded lady Iell Adams' time there. Finally, *Pantomime* by Laura Lam (2013) is set in the 107th Century in a pseudo-Victorian society. Iphigenia Laurus runs away from home and hides in the circus as Micah Grey. While the reader knows that Iphigenia/Micah is intersex, the majority of the characters do not.

Sex and Gender

A baby has no sex prior to the moment the midwife declares, 'It's a girl/boy'. A binary sex classification is bestowed upon the child following sight of the baby's genitals. That a child is assigned a sex this way is problematic for two reasons: one, biological sex is also determined by chromosomes and hormones. This means a number of intersex conditions go unidentified and can cause problems later in life: during puberty when their biological sex appears to change, or in adulthood when they are deemed infertile. Secondly, many societies continue to dictate that there are only two sex classifications in humans: male and female. This leads to babies who are born identifiably intersex, classified by their genitalia, forced to undergo 'corrective' gender surgery, often within twenty-four hours of their birth.

Intersex is an umbrella term for a number of conditions that signify a variation from the binary male or female body. Accord Alliance[2] define intersex as 'congenital conditions in which development of chromosomal, gonadal, or anatomic sex is atypical' (2016). They list eighteen conditions that cover ambiguous genitalia and a range of hormone and chromosome variations. Inevitably this means there is no consensus as to the number of people who are intersex. U.S. specialists estimate that a baby with genitals ambiguous enough not to identify with either binary sex constitutes 1 in 2000 live births. (Accord Alliance 2016) However, Blackless et al. (2000) conclude that the number of live births which 'do not conform to a Platonic ideal of absolute sex chromosome, gonadal, genital and hormonal dimorphism'[3] (151) is 1.7%. This suggests that the sex binary is a construction which excludes 1.7% of the population, rendering them either invisible or subject to medical intervention in order to conform to norms even medical professionals recognise as unachievable.

While those with ambiguous genitals account for only a small number of the intersex population, all three of the novels named above focus on characters with ambiguous genitalia. It is possible that the reason for this is that, according to Ward Hall's 'King

2 Accord Alliance replaced the Intersex Society of North America in March 2008.

3 'With respect to sex chromosome composition, gonadal structure, hormone levels, and the structure of the internal genitalia […] we generally consider *Homo sapiens* to be absolutely dimorphic. Biologists and medical scientists recognise, of course, that absolute dimorphism is a Platonic ideal not actually achieved in the natural world. Nonetheless, the normative nature of medical science uses as an assumption, the proposition that for each sex there is a single, correct developmental pathway. Medical scientists, therefore, define as abnormal any deviation from bimodally distributed genitalia or chromosomal composition.' (Conte and Grumbach 1989) (Blackless et al. 2000, 151).

of the Sideshow', '"the greatest attraction for the blow-off was a half-and-half"' (Mannix 1976, 64). However, in all of these novels, the characters' intersex condition is hidden from those around them.

Despite the fact that sex and gender are not synonymous, wider society often regards them as such. This provides further complications for intersex people.

Judith Butler defines gender as 'the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1999, 45). This suggests that it is possible for an intersex person to appear as one gender '*on the surface* of the body' (1999, 185). However, Butler argues that 'certain kinds of gendered expressions [are] found to be false and derivative, and others, true and original' (1999, viii). The question for intersex people is who makes the decisions as to what a true gender expression is for someone who does not conform to the sex binary. Currently this appears to be their parents and medical professionals at the behest of society. In terms of novels, this status is given to the author who can choose either to reflect society or to question it.

Butler uses a discussion about drag to reframe gender and demonstrate the falsity of the gender binary:

> But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance (1999, 187).

As we shall see, this distinction also applies to people with ambiguous genitalia, further exemplifying that the gender binary is a societal construction.

The History of Intersex People in the USA

Elizabeth Reiz (2009) offers an account of the history of intersex people in the USA, including the first explicit case of an individual with ambiguous genitalia in American legal history. In 1629, Thomas/Thomasine Hall was brought before the court for 'dressing in women's apparel' (2009, 10). Hall's description of their life in which they moved from a male gender identity to wearing 'woemans apparel' (2009, 11) and then back to the masculine again, would concur with modern definitions of a gender fluid identity. When the court agreed that Hall's sexual characteristics marked them as both male and female, '[i]t decreed that henceforth s/he be required to wear a paradoxical costume consisting of "mans apparel, only his head to be attired in a Coyfe and Crossclothe with an Apron before him"' (2009, 12). The court, therefore, considered

particular items of clothing to identify the anatomy beneath them. Their ruling condemns Thomas/Thomasine to wear a combination of what the court deems to be male and female clothing.

There is a crossover here with Butler's use of drag as an illusion of gender identity. She comments on how an individual's clothing choices can give us an 'erroneous' (1999, xxiv) cultural reading of the anatomy beneath. The punishment given to Hall for daring to live as a gender fluid person was to ensure that their clothing did highlight their anatomical variation. This ruling was no doubt made to humiliate Hall and prevent them from forming intimate relations with males or females.

Reiz also details the legalities for intersex people in eighteenth-century America. These included whether they 'should be given a male or female name at birth to whether or not a hermaphrodite should be allowed to marry or divorce' (2009, 10). The emphasis was on them to choose one sex. Reiz draws links between 'increasing geographic mobility and urbanization and new impersonal commercial networks' (2009, 30) and the idea of someone with ambiguous genitalia as 'repulsive and duplicitous' (2009, 24). Gender fluidity was not an option that society was willing to accept.

Representations of Intersex People with Ambiguous Genitalia in Circus Novels

In both *The Bearded Lady* and *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno*, the identities of Marion Des Cartes and Iell Adams are hidden from the reader and the novels' protagonists. In both instances, their gender performance encourages us to read the characters' genders as female.

> [Marion] was a perfectly formed, tall, ethereal angel of a being in a flashing silver vest and riding skirt. She had luminous skin and dark silken hair radiating in waves to her shoulders. Her eyes were steely and hypnotic. This fiery angelic apparition would have continued to hold the girls spellbound had she remained silent, but her low baritone voice popped the tenuous bubble of illusion (Dieguez 1999, 59).

Dieguez initially describes Marion as an archetype of feminine beauty, focusing on her skin, hair and eyes, but then goes on to state that her voice prevents her from being the heavenly creature the narrator, Jessie, and her sister, Tweets, believed her to be. Throughout the first third of the novel, Marion is repeatedly described as beautiful, 'the object of many men's fantasies' (1999, 104) but there are two suggestions she is not able to fully perform as a woman: the first is the description of her hands, twice within four pages, as 'large' and 'strong and rather large for a woman' (1999, 60, 63). It is implied that her hands, and therefore Marion, are

powerful and this is not a trait aligned with femininity. The second refers to the way she walks:

> It seemed to Jessie that Marion walked as though she were nude. She didn't fuss with clothes the way other women did. She didn't lift the hem of her skirt to step over obstacles, but strode blithely, expecting her vestments to flow with her like the servants they were. An artist…Jessie concluded admiringly (1999, 86).

Dieguez has Jessie refer to Marion as 'an artist' when she, unbeknownst to Jessie, is performing her gender and, in terms of societal standards and expectations, failing. In Jessie's eyes, the exception raises her status, leaving no scope for questioning her identity. Butler argues that the occasional discontinuity of the repeated acts which give the illusion of a stable gender identity 'reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness' of this identity (1999, 192). The combination of the way Marion walks, her hands and her voice, guides the reader to read Marion as potentially male. Despite the novel being set in a circus, where the 'hermaphrodite' was a popular sideshow exhibit, it is unlikely the reader would make the assumption that Marion is an intersex person.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, only men have been awarded universal status, women have been designated a position in relation to this. Butler argues that this leads to the conclusion that 'one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair' (1999, 30). With this cultural background brought to the text by the reader, there are only two possibilities for Miriam's physical identity: she must either be a woman with some traits that would be read as masculine or a man disguised as a woman, performing (and occasionally failing) a female gender identity.

Iell Adams' first full appearance in *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno* is via a portrait of her that Bartholomew Fortuno finds in the bowels of P. T. Barnum's American Museum.

> She was stunning, simply stunning. Her face, her skin, her bright hair: all beautiful. But most stunning of all? She sported the most astonishing beard I had ever set eyes upon. Fire-red and passionate, it erupted from her face like an uncaged animal, roaming over voluminous breasts and reaching out at the ends like the tentacles of some man-eating primordial beast. I'd seen bearded women before, of course, heavy-featured women cursed with thick arms and chins buried beneath an outbreak of unseemly hair – the effect more like a man in a dress. But this! Her sea-coloured cape draped across one shoulder and the other was bare, its skin porcelain white. Her eyes were deep green, and they gazed imperiously down an aquiline nose as if in challenge to the entire world of men. (Bryson 2010, 56-57)

Like Marion, Iell's skin, hair and eyes are highlighted for their beauty. Bartholomew, and therefore the reader, also reads Iell as female due to her 'voluminous breasts' and his suggestion that, despite her beard which would be read as masculine within the gender binary, she looks utterly feminine. The comparison to other bearded ladies he has encountered reinforces this reading.

The difference between the portrayal of Iell Adams and that of Marion Des Cartes is partially due to the narrative perspective. *The Bearded Lady* is told in third person subjective from the point of view of Jessie. Although this suggests that the reader's perspective will converge with that of the protagonist, it leaves scope for authorial comment. *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno* is in first person from the protagonist's viewpoint. This leaves the reader purely with the view that Bartholomew holds, one which, for the majority of the book, is blinded by love. There is only one point where it is suggested that Iell may be anything other than feminine and that occurs during a conversation in her quarters where she stands behind a chair, 'resting her elbows on the backrest, tilting forward like a man'. The point where Bartholomew realises that Iell might not be who he thinks she is occurs when he is presented with a portfolio of photographs of her in which she has posed in a number of provocative positions.

> How comfortable she'd looked. As if she'd been caught unawares in her natural state. She had posed, hadn't she? What was I thinking? She wasn't comfortable. She was an actress. A performer. That look had been faked. (Bryson 2010, 240)

Miriam is 'an artist', Iell is an 'actress' and 'performer'. Here, however, Bartholomew sees the performance as consolidation of her femininity. It is not an aberration in the sense that it brings Iell's gender performance into question, instead it leaves the narrator questioning her virtue, another societal condition of women.

Both Dieguez and Ellen Bryson are guilty of dehumanising Marion and Iell. This is prominently displayed at the climax to each novel where the intersex nature of the characters is revealed: they are used as plot devices to provide a twist in the tale. The revelations of the characters' false gender identities also illustrates Reiz's comments about hermaphrodites being regarded as 'duplicitous' (2009, 24) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is sharply illustrated in Jessie's reaction to the revelation that Marion is intersex: 'This was not the perfect Marion that Jessie had so adored[…]This Marion wasn't even ordinary; this person was a sham, a liar, and a whimpering freak, as ugly…as ugly as…' (Dieguez 1999, 286). Dieguez's vocabulary choices – 'sham', 'liar' – emphasise the idea of intersex people being deceitful. This is further supported by Marion's admission that she is on the run from the FBI, wanted for the murder of a soldier she killed in revenge for her brother's death. The

authorities are looking for a man as, despite her mother's attempts to make her wear a dress, Marion identified as male from a young age.

However, Tweets' reaction to the revelation introduces the possibility of an alternative viewpoint: 'What a stroke of luck; Marion could be a boy or a girl with a mere change of clothes. Think of the trouble she could get into if she cared to take advantage' (Dieguez 1999, 296). Even though this is a positive reaction, once again the idea of deception is present. Through Tweets' perception, however, this becomes exciting and playful; if Tweets represents a younger generation this could suggest that acceptance is possible although not unproblematic.

Bryson reveals Iell's sex to both Fortuno and the reader when the former sneaks into a private viewing Iell has been forced to perform by Barnum.

> Her other sex, as real and large as my own, eased out languidly from between her legs as she slipped a long slender finger into her orifice in proof that the he was also a she. I reeled with the fact of it. A gift like none I have ever seen. Magnificent. Utterly horrible. Not only woman, but man as well. (2010, 317)

The scene is salacious, crude and designed to provoke revulsion in the reader. Again, the reader is guided to believe that intersex people are dishonest and deceptive, although the disgust combined with awe which Bartholomew Fortuno greets the revelation with demonstrates one reason why an intersex person might feel compelled or even condemned to hide their status. This is compounded by Fortuno's lack of vocabulary to describe Iell: he can only refer to her within the confines of the sex and gender binaries.

In contrast to these two portrayals, *Pantomime* (Lam 2013) has been praised by reviewers from the LGBTIQ communities for its portrayal of an intersex teenager[4]. It is revealed to the reader early in the narrative that Micah Grey/Iphigenia Laurus[5] is intersex. The use of a pseudo-Victorian society in the 107th century seems to demonstrate that society's views of ambiguous genitalia are outdated. This leads us to reflect on our own society, finding much about which to be critical.

Iphigenia becomes Micah and runs away from home after her parents receive an offer of marriage for her and decide she must have 'corrective' surgery in order for the marriage to have any chance of success. Lam puts forward both sides of the gender argument: Iphigenia's father says, 'Perhaps Iphigenia was meant to be masculine

4 https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2015/06/28/book-review-pantomime-by-laura-lam/. Accessed 21st August 2016; http://www.onceuponabookcase.co.uk/2013/07/review-pantomime-by-laura-lam.html. Accessed 21st August 2016; http://www.gayya.org/?p=1334. Accessed 21st August 2016

5 Lam uses he/she pronouns as the character changes identity. For continuity, I will follow the same pattern.

rather than feminine, or somewhere in the middle' (2013, 201-2). Here there is a suggestion that a spectrum of gender might be a possibility. However, he then goes on to refer to Iphigenia's intersex status as a 'condition'. Her mother expands on this:

> A condition that now has a cure[…]Iphigenia can become a girl. Only a girl. Doctor Ambrose is positive that the surgery would be successful. She'd have a bit of scarring, but he says it would be minimal. Between that and some daily medication, she would be female. (2013, 203)

The idea that being intersex is a condition for which there is a cure suggests that it is still seen as a medical disorder, due to the fact that it does not conform to the binaries of sex and gender, which remain unbroken in this society.

Again, her father defends her, suggesting that this would remove half of who she is and that she is too fond of 'boyish things' to 'ever be wholly female' (2013, 203). Eventually he relents when her mother suggests this is what's best for her: she needs to marry for the family's status in society. Here Iphigenia is twice erased: as an intersex person and then as a woman, a bride, a gift connecting two families' lineage. Iphigenia's own thoughts on overhearing the conversation support the idea of her being dehumanised: 'I did not like what I was, but I liked this proposed cure even less' (2013, 203). The words Lam chooses emphasise her distance her from her own body: she sounds as though she is describing an object or a thing, not her own person.

Once Iphigenia runs away and disguises herself as Micah, he says, 'At least in the circus I had the freedom to be myself' (2013, 102). Taken alone this line seems to suggest that this person has accepted who they are and can live freely as an intersex person. However, this line needs to be taken in the context of those prior to it:

> Perhaps my running away would have proven to my parents that I would not allow them to change my life and they would leave me be.
>
> Leave me to be a spinster, tolerated in society but always just outside of it, pitied and always under my parents' roof. And if they died before me, I would be a burden on Cyril. As a Laurus, I would have no way to support myself through employment, unless I became a governess or turned to writing or teaching, neither of which I thought would be my true calling. At least in the circus I had the freedom to be myself. (2013, 102)

It is clear that Micah still sees himself as an outsider, someone who would be tolerated but never accepted. Although he describes himself as free in the circus he still hides the fact he is intersex, binding his breasts and telling no one of his true identity. Part of the reason for this is that he is on the run, his parents have a detective looking for him, and once again an intersex person in a circus novel is linked to

deception. The other part of the reason, however, is that even in the circus, he feels he wouldn't be accepted.

Like the other two novels, *Pantomime* also contains an instance of the protagonist as actor/performer but because Lam does not use her protagonist's sex as a plot device, she is able to explore ideas of gender performativity more explicitly. When the circus company within which Iphigenia is hidden as Micah, the trapeze artist, decide to perform the classic romance *Leander & Iona*, Micah finds himself playing the female lead. His love interest, Aenea, describes him as 'a prettier girl than I am!' (2013, 349) and Dryston, the clown, tells him 'you look and sound a little too believable as a woman' (2013, 355). Lam highlights that Iphigenia/Micah performs both as a female and a male.

If Butler's comments with regards to drag are transposed to intersex people and Iphigenia/Micah specifically, Lam uses the distinction of anatomy and gender to demonstrate that an intersex person's anatomy can be both simultaneously synonymous and distinct from their gender performance depending how their gender is read by others. Lam moves the discussion beyond this, demonstrating the instability of both the sex and gender binaries. This is where *Pantomime* differs from the other two novels: where their portrayal of an intersex character is managed within the confines of the gender binary, using it as a plot device in order to produce a climactic revelation, Lam breaks the binary demonstrating that an intersex person can be gender fluid. If their only choice is to perform as male or female, then that decision should be made according to which gender they feel most comfortable as, or even which gender they feel most comfortable as at any particular moment; there is no requirement beyond societal control and normative structures that necessitates a person to maintain a stable gender identity.

Again, as in the other novels, there is a climactic moment when Micah reveals he is intersex. Unable to articulate who he is, Micah removes his clothing to reveal his breasts and genitals. In this instance, the reveal does not involve the reader, it is directed to Aenea, the trapeze artist with whom Micah has been having a romantic relationship and Dryston who, through his own class-based deception, has become a reluctant friend to Micah. Like Jessie and Bartholomew, Aenea rejects Micah, feeling that she has been deceived. Again, Lam links intersex with deception. However, the novel ends with Dryston and Micah teaming up: 'You're strange, and there's no denying that. But I'm strange as well, and most certainly more monstrous than you' (2013, 388). Lam offers hope for intersex people to be accepted by others; however, Dryston is also an outsider and it is acceptance on the terms that they both reside beyond gender, class and sexual normative boundaries.

Sexuality and the Heterosexual Reinforcement of the Gender Binary

In the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler concedes 'that the performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice' (xiv). However, it is impossible to address the treatment and representation of intersex people without recourse to the socially constructed link between sexuality and social status.

Sigmund Freud's reference to anyone not strictly heterosexual as an 'invert' (1987, 46-47) and his three classifications for people's behaviour established homosexuals in opposition to the desired norm while his attempts to explain homosexuality through the lens of apparently gendered behaviour and/or as a result of conditions of upbringing only served to cement heterosexuality as the only acceptable expression of sexuality.

The creation of a homosexual identity places anyone identifying as such as 'other' and therefore in opposition to dominant society. This dominant, heterosexual, society then functions in order to maintain the alleged disparities in sex and gender. Butler states that identities 'in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender' (25) cannot exist in this type of society. We have already seen that this is true for intersex people with regards to their gender following from their sex. It is also true in terms of their sexuality.

In the case of the aforementioned Thomas/Thomasine Hall, Reiz declares that the court's ruling that Hall should wear a combination of what was regarded to be masculine and feminine garments was done to prevent them from seducing 'the unwary of either sex, should s/he attempt to do so, and then to have coitus with the "wrong" sex' (2009, 12). For a person with two sets of functioning genitalia, who is of 'the wrong sex'? A person of ambiguous genitals could be classified as either/both heterosexual/homosexual depending on their gender identity and the society in which they live. Reiz goes on to say that the by the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries in America, hermaphrodites were suspected of promiscuity due to medical reports which stated that those examined were capable of and reportedly did engage in sexual intercourse with both sexes.

It is a short step from those thoughts to the erasure of intersex people and this has been achieved through corrective surgery, declarations of sex on the birth certificate and the proliferation of the gender binary. This has helped to maintain the patriarchal, heterosexual status quo, designating those who refuse to conform as 'other' and 'unnatural'.

In *The Bearded Lady*, Jessie supresses her feelings for Marion when she believes she is falling in love with her. Dieguez describes her as feeling 'longing, fear, and shame' (1999, 191). Jessie's overriding wish for a heteronormative relationship is expressed in her attempts to replace Marion's face in her subconscious with 'the more seemly image of a man's' (1999, 191). Not a specific man, any man is preferable to a desire

for a woman. When Marion's intersex nature is revealed, Jessie rejects her and Marion leaves the circus. However, at the end of the novel, they are reconciled via a letter, an invitation for Jessie to join Marion in Paris. Dieguez relates a fantasy of Jessie's to the reader where she and Marion are at the beach where they play naked in the water before having sex on the sand. Although female pronouns are still used, the naked, intersex, Marion is described by Jessie as 'the most beautiful being [she] had ever seen' and the final words of the book are 'the truly loved' (1999, 307-8) suggesting that a life outside of the gender binary and heternormativity is possible. However, Marion's true identity remains hidden from society and the book ends without an indication of whether her seemingly homosexual relationship with Jessie will be accepted by Parisian society. She may be visible to Jessie but it appears that the double erasure of Marion's identity by society will continue.

Iell has a more adverse ending with regards to her sexuality in *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno*. Two-thirds of the way into the novel, she clearly rejects Emma Swan, the giantess.[6] Swan not only loves Iell, she knows that Iell is intersex and accepts her wholeheartedly: 'I love every single part of you however strange' (Bryson 2010, 186), although her use of the word 'strange' positions Iell's anatomy against the normative. Iell rejects Emma's advances with a clear and simple, 'I'm sorry' (Bryson 2010, 186). Bryson rejects the idea of sexual promiscuity for Iell and also shows that she does not hide her identity from Emma. As far as the reader and Fortuno are concerned, Iell conforms to the gender binary and the heterosexual norm. Later, Iell reveals she was married, her husband beating her almost to death on their wedding night upon first sight of her anatomy. The previously besotted Fortuno also rejects her once he has seen her genitalia. He offers her the possibility of a life together but refers to her 'peculiarities' and '*that*' (2010, 323), suggesting that her real identity can be erased living as a heterosexual couple, conforming to the gender binary, outwardly, at least. Iell herself makes reference to wanting 'to live a normal life' (2010, 323) but knows it is impossible. In order for Iell to be accepted, Bryson only allows her the option of a relationship with Emma Swan. This appears to mirror the relationship Jessie and Marion have at the end of *The Bearded Lady* but while Jessie seems to accept Marion as intersex, Emma makes clear to Fortuno that her preference is for men. Iell's rejection of Emma suggests that Iell will not erase her chosen identity by either appearing as a man in a heterosexual relationship or identifying as bisexual and thereby erasing her sexuality as well as her sex and gender. Paradoxically however, by doing so Bryson still further highlights Iell as 'other', fashioning her identity against the universal masculine as opposed to embracing it.

Iphigenia Laurus from *Pantomime* is the only one of the three intersex characters to disguise themselves as male rather than female. As female, Iphigenia is vulnerable both to a marriage and to surgery she does not want. This choice prevents her erasure in one sense, at least temporarily, as she appears as the universal gender, free to exist

6 This character is based on Anna Swan, the giantess, who did reside at the American Museum. There is no explanation as to why Bryson has changed her forename but not her family name.

and move about the world unquestioned. Again, despite the praise *Pantomime* has garnered from the LGBTIQ communities, Lam conceives Iphigenia/Micah's relationships firmly within the heternormative, at least in appearance. Before Iphigenia runs away from home, she plays a game of hide and seek with her brother and his friends. Hidden in a tree with Damien, he kisses her. She intends to push him away after a minute but his hand goes beneath her petticoats and between her legs. She senses his horror. '"Please…" I whispered, hoarsely. "I was…born with-" "A prick." His voice was flat, surprised and cruel.' She goes on to say that she will never forget that he 'recoiled in revulsion' (2013, 89-90). While Iphigenia does not question her sexuality while being raised as female, when she chooses the masculine identity of Micah and begins a relationship with Aenea, the trapeze artist, he asks, '…would I be a girl kissing her, or a boy?' (2013, 193). Here Lam deviates both from society's heterosexual norm and that of the other books. She is the only author of the three to question an alternative to a sexual binary that marks heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as other. Whilst the possibility of someone gender fluid freely existing in circus literature remains unfulfilled, Lam does at least posit the possibility of an alternative sex and sexual identity.

Conclusion

I have argued that the novels cited fail to provide a representative and, therefore, diverse portrait of intersex people. A focus on people with ambiguous genitalia would fit a traditional circus theme if it were used to create a 'half-man, half-woman' exhibit. However, through making these intersex characters plot devices, Dieguez and Bryson dehumanise them, forcing them into the sex and gender binaries created by their societies, using their sexuality to mark them as 'other' and reinforcing the view that those with ambiguous genitalia are duplicitous. Lam's gender fluid protagonist, partially created to support teenagers wanting to explore their own gender identity (Lam, 2015), offers some hope that gender fluidity is possible. However, the reactions from other characters illustrate opinions held in our society. This could support teenagers dealing with similar issues but also show that wholesale acceptance is unlikely.

One of the key problems with the small number of portrayals of intersex people in literature is that these few representations become universal depictions. Even in novels set in the circus and sideshow, places outside of dominant societal norms, intersex characters are viewed at best as outsiders and at worst as deceptive, licentious beings. By attempting to position them against the binaries of sex and gender and, therefore, heterosexual norms, using them as plot devices rather than portrayals of human beings, writers continue to erase intersex people, dehumanising them and marking them firmly as 'other'. In order to accurately represent intersex communities, writers of circus and sideshow novels need to provide a wider range of portrayals of intersex characters, further considering ideas of gender fluidity and the language they

use to illustrate these characters. This way, writers will support the inclusion of intersex people in society as a whole.

References

Blackness, M., Charuvastra, A., Derryck, A., Fausto-Sterling, A., Lauzanne, K. and Lee, E., (2000). 'How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis', *American Journal of Human Biology*, 12(2), 151-166

Bryson, E. (2010) *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno*, London: Picador

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble* (Second Edition), New York: Routledge

Dieguez, S. (1999) *The Bearded Lady*, Georgia: Hill Street Press

Freud, S. (1987) *On Sexuality*, London: Penguin Books

Irigaray, L. (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One* New York: Cornell University Press

Lam, L. (2013) *Pantomime*, Nottingham: Strange Chemistry

Lam, L. (2015) 'Ask Me Anything' [online] 10 June. Available at http://lauraroselam.tumblr.com/post/121192090380/i-have-to-say-i-love-your-book-pantomime-and-your. Accessed 21st August 2016.

Low, J. (2016) 'Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results' [online] 26 January. Available at http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/. Accessed 8th April 2017.

Mannix, D.P. (1976) *Freaks: We Who Are Not as Others*, Hong Kong: Pocket Books

Reiz, E. (2009) *Bodies in Doubt*: *An American History of Intersex*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Wittig, M. (1992) *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press

Naomi Frisby is PhD candidate in creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University. She is writing a speculative fiction novel set around a sideshow. Her thesis, Female Freaks and Feminism: Gender and Representation in Circus and Sideshow Literature, considers the portrayal of bodies read as female in the context of the sideshow and the impact this has on wider society. Her short stories have been shortlisted for The White Review Short Story Prize and longlisted for the Manchester Fiction Prize. She blogs about female writers at https://thewritesofwoman.com and has also written for Fiction Uncovered, Waterstones' blog and Tilted Axis Press' blog. She can be found on Twitter @Frizbot.
Email: Naomi.R.Frisby@student.shu.ac.uk

‘We Are Not Things’: Infertility, Reproduction, and Rhetoric of Control in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*

EMILY ROWSON, *Northumbria University*

ABSTRACT
Pregnancy occupies an uncertain position in Hollywood cinema, and discussions of infertility are notably absent. Indeed, two blockbusters (*Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Mad Max: Fury Road)* invested in the politics and rhetoric of reproduction met with disparate critical and popular opinion. This article will examine the potential reasons for this, whilst establishing ideological parity between the films.

KEYWORDS
Pregnancy, Infertility, Gender, Whedon, *Mad Max*

If pregnancy’s centrality to feminist literature is evident, its significance in film is less so. Pregnancy was absent at cinema’s outset, then became associated with horror before becoming a central theme in the 1980s. Reproduction is a divisive issue, and its depictions on screen are complex, perhaps because ‘the pregnant body may be a screen for our fantasies and fears about ourselves’ (Oliver, 2012, 25): it is a source of cultural and social anxiety.

Pregnancy may be a source of anxiety, yet depictions of infertility are notably absent. Accordingly, this article will analyse reproduction and infertility narratives in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015). Whedon received backlash for his characterisation of Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow**,** (Scarlett Johansson) in *Age of Ultron*, whilst *Fury Road* has been praised for its brand of feminism. This article will problematise this dichotomy, using the narratives, industrial and authorial legacies, and the current feminist media context to determine why the films received such disparate reactions, and if they differ ideologically, or forward complementary commentary.

Hollywood and Pregnancy

It is necessary to place discussion in the context of Hollywood cinema and reproduction. Reproduction is a contradiction: objectively, it is a biological imperative; however, it carries cultural and emotional baggage meaning debate around it devolves into entrenched ideologies. Perhaps this is attributable to reproduction’s significances: it is a ‘“fact of life”’ (Rapp 2001, 470), a ‘guarantee of a history’ (Doane 2000, 118), and a trigger for ‘anxieties about power, control [...] [and] humanity’ (Oliver 2012, 125). It is inherently ambiguous, deconstructing binaries; it is also almost exclusively the purview of women. This statement is not intentionally exclusionary: women are frequently reduced to the physical with their capacity, or desire, to have children taken as womanhood’s essence. Womanhood extends beyond this capacity or desire; however, for the purposes of this article, reproduction will be

addressed as a gendered issue as the physical act of pregnancy is undertaken, *most* of the time, by a biological, self-identifying woman.

Reproductive politics' centrality in feminist discourse is unsurprising: women are 'identified with the body rather than the mind' (Rapp 2001, 467). Women's roles 'as breeders and feeders' (ibid) are considered natural, ensuring 'we would have to shake the pillars of Nature Herself to seek […] a re-division of labour' (ibid): a daunting task. This association explains why some feminists maintain women will only gain emancipation through a rejection of motherhood: de Beauvoir 'repeatedly warns women's reproductive function limits them' (Oliver 2012, 23), preventing participation in social and political spheres. One may wish to consider this view outdated, but it retains relevance.

Additionally, cultural images can inform opinions, which Hall terms 'cultural circuit' (Ellis-West 2011, 105). Occasionally, the overall effect is innocuous, but images can create false narratives which manipulate real world debate, and this is pertinent when considering reproduction for 'the formation of the foetus is […] the history of its visualization' (Tremain 2006, 36). Imagery, and its cultural impact, is particularly significant in reproductive debates.

Whilst images of pregnancy are unexceptional in Hollywood films currently, they have not always been. Birth control's advent, and the consequent reproductive freedom, made pregnancy an issue for feminist authors in the 1960s and 1970s, but Hollywood avoided the issue, instead focussing on sexual liberation. Indeed, when reproduction was a central theme it was usually in horror films, for example in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968), ensuring female protagonists were identified with monsters, and pregnancy with the abject, articulating latent anxieties around female reproductive capacities.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift, with pregnancy beginning to feature as a central theme in mainstream film; *She's Having a Baby* (Hughes 1988) and *Look Who's Talking*, (Heckerling 1989) for example. Responses to this shift were varied: Oliver states it was indicative of the increasing 'social acceptance of women's bodies' (2012, 22), whilst others argued these films largely reinforced a '"motherhood ideology"' (Kaplan in Ellis West 2011, 109). These films predominantly demonstrated the incompatibility of motherhood and work: they simultaneously advocated more family orientated roles for fathers, therefore, to Kaplan, reinforcing the white, middle-class, patriarchal nuclear family's importance (ibid).

Unsurprisingly, reproduction narratives have progressed with films like *Juno* (Reitman 2007) and *Knocked Up* (Apatow 2007) offering 'partial revisions of […] traditional narratives' (Ellis West 2011, 109); nevertheless, stereotypes have endured. Images of pregnancy and birth remain clichéd and sanitised, and do not depict the realities of either. These images of pregnancy promote a twist on traditional family values, offering visions of women 'having it all', or, at least, 'realising that having babies is more important than anything else' (Oliver 2012, 25).

Seemingly, traditional family values are still being promoted in film in spite of progression. This traditionalism is emphasised when considering what these films fail to discuss: loss and infertility. Both remain subject to Foucault's triple edict of modern puritanism: '"taboo, nonexistence, and silence"' (Layne 1997, 291), which leads to 'the experience of loss [being] denied' (Layne 1997, 293).

This silence may be rationalised as the issues framing these subjects are utilised by anti-abortionists. Abortion rights are not universal or inalienable. Accordingly, it is logical to suggest acknowledging foetal personhood and promoting discussion of miscarriage and infertility as grief-inducing will aid anti-abortion campaigns, threatening abortion rights. Nevertheless, these considerations, whilst understandable, are flawed. By pursuing this perspective, feminists have potentially abandoned debate to anti-choice activists as 'to speak of pregnancy loss is to automatically make oneself suspect among feminists' (Layne 1997, 305). Whilst reference has been made to miscarriage, such considerations are applicable to infertility.

Feminist perspectives regarding infertility are contradictory. As Sandelowski states, feminist discussion must not condemn women for wanting children as women who have children relatively straightforwardly are not 'subject to the same feminist critique of those who try but fail' (ibid). Indeed, '"by locating women's desire for children [...] in the pronatalist imperatives of patriarchal culture [feminist critics] permit women no authentic desire or choice"' (Sandelowski in Layne 1997, 305). Whilst societal pressure on women to have children exists, understanding the potential source of a need does not dispel it, and as, arguably, all desires are socially produced, regulated and maintained, a desire for children does not differ.

All considered, one might assume the release of two blockbusters in recent years that contained discussion of infertility, power relations, and female autonomy would be met with acclaim. Set post-nuclear holocaust, *Mad Max: Fury Road* details Furiosa's (Charlize Theron) attempts to liberate despot Imortan Joe's (Hugh Keays-Byrne) wives from sexual and reproductive slavery. In this world, bodies are commodified, and the narrative answers the refrain 'who killed the world?' with a resolute 'men'. *Avengers: Age of Ultron*'s narrative concerns artificial intelligence's potential sentience as demonstrated by the murderous Ultron (James Spader). A subplot concerns Natasha's backstory, including the revelation that her spy training culminated in her sterilisation. Despite thematic similarities, which will be expanded upon later, the films received contrasting critical and popular reception. *Age of Ultron* prompted opinion pieces and a twitterstorm directed at writer and director Joss Whedon, voicing accusations of misogyny. To some, Whedon had foisted a 'frustrated desire for motherhood and self-loathing onto [Black Widow]' (Woerner & Trendacosta 2015) undermining her autonomy and heroism. Claims were made Natasha's characterisation contributed to biological essentialism in the film, which forwarded the notion women ultimately desired to settle down and have children (Hill 2014). Alternatively, *Fury Road* was declared a 'feminist conspiracy of mass-emasculating proportion' (Valenti, 2015) by high

profile men's rights activists, which led to feminist praise (Valenti, 2015, Smith, 2015) and industry awards. One may assume the different receptions came because the films forwarded contradictory narratives, and whilst this reading is valid, this article contends the films forward complimentary narratives and the differences in reception are attributable to concerns of authorship, industry, and a post-feminist media context. Consequently, this article will demonstrate the texts' thematic similarities and the differing contexts for their reception. This article will not denigrate either film's 'feminist' credentials, but will argue *Age of Ultron* forwards a nuanced articulation of *Fury Road's* fist pumping, empowering, feminist narrative.

Age of Ultron and the Black Widow Backlash

As aforementioned, criticism of Natasha's infertility was widespread: Stern stated the film reduced a 'badass assassin' to a 'baby obsessed flirt' (Stern 2015), whilst Bennett accused Whedon of detonating 'an old fashioned fertility bomb' (Bennett 2015). These claims are not meritless or unprecedented: motherhood has been used to reduce female heroes, to 'soften' them. In this configuration, 'the maternal recurs as a motivating factor' (Inness 1999, 69) and is the primary source of identity. This configuration is common in fantastic genres where 'the mother has been a constant presence' (Conrad 2011, 82). Whilst attempts have been made, via the use of single mothers and unconventional family setups, to challenge stereotypes, the perpetuation of this role confirms the '"special tie that women have with children" that […] Firestone […] describes as being "no more than shared oppression"' (Conrad 2011, 81). This linkage of women and motherhood implies, regardless of the fantastic's new possibilities, women will be defined by, and limited to, biology. Accordingly, the frustration expressed at the maternal aspect of Natasha's narrative arc is understandable.

Additionally, the depiction of this revelation is criticisable. In this scene, Natasha and Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) are discussing their fledging relationship's possible futures. The scene is fraught with emotional vulnerability; Natasha is in a bathrobe, Banner is half-dressed. The space's domesticity adds intimacy; the room is, in contrast to the Avengers' headquarters, cluttered with the detritus of family life: children's paintings cover the walls. It must be noted, and is infrequently recognised, Natasha's revelation of her infertility is prompted by a confession by Banner, creating an image of mutual intimacy rather than confessional shame. Typically, 'there has been a greater emphasis on infertility as a women's issue' (Johnson & Simon 2012, 265), so recognition of the issue's dual nature is commendable. Nevertheless, Natasha's use of 'monster' in her statement problematises positive readings. After detailing her enforced sterilisation, she reassures Banner he 'isn't the only monster on the team'. The statement's negative, reductive connotations are self-evident, and it implies women who do not express the expected interest in bearing children are deviant. The association of monstrosity with pregnancy still abounds in cinema (Oliver, 2012), creating a contradiction in which fertility is expected and denigrated.

In abstract, the linkage of infertility and monstrosity is inherently negative; however, this conclusion disregards the narrative's context and themes. 'Monster' had been used before

Natasha's statement as an adjective within the narrative: Tony, (Robert Downey Jr) Bruce and the entire Avengers team are referred to as 'monsters'. Furthermore, concepts of monstrosity relate to the narrative's central premise: evolution, and, as is common in Whedon's output, humanism and heroism. Consequently, Natasha's inability to bear children is indebted to discussions of evolution. Tony Stark creates Ultron, an artificial intelligence, to bring about peace; however, Ultron decides '[humans] don't need to be protected, they need to evolve', thus introducing concepts of worth, desirability, and what it means to be human. Tony is paternally, if not biologically, linked to Ultron, and this is evidenced through Ultron's inheritance of Tony's mannerisms and phrases. Moreover, Tony's sarcastic assertion Ultron will 'break your old man's heart', and Ultron's pathological hatred of Tony suggests intergenerational conflict. Positioning Ultron as Tony's quasi-offspring ensures *Age of Ultron* engages with the theme of living in a society in which definitions of humanity are being undermined as evolution takes on new, technologically mediated forms. Alone, Tony's creation of Ultron may be read as a cautionary tale concerning male intervention in the female sphere of reproduction; however, upon considering the narrative context this reading seems limited. Many of the Avengers are results of tampering with nature, and, with the exception of Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), have no identifiable family. Ultron was designed to render the Avengers obsolete. They resemble the 'necessary evil' figure in Westerns: essential to providing a fragile society security to develop, but necessarily expendable if civilisation is to emerge. This isolation imbues the Avengers with differing notions of monstrosity, and excludes them from the society they strive to save: they are, evolutionarily, a dead end; Natasha's 'monstrosity' is shared.

Yet, the Avengers' exclusion from society does not prevent them developing their community. Hawkeye's family match the American nuclear ideal; however, their physical isolation and that they are kept secret suggests this ideal may be unsustainable. Regardless of Hawkeye's family's status and security, Whedon often constructs alternate families, typically 'composed of social exiles' (Battis 2005, 13), of which the Avengers may be considered an example. They may be an evolutionary dead end, they may be 'monstrous', but they are a family.

To expand upon evolution, such discussions require consideration of desirability and worth, which *Ultron* provides. Natasha is not 'naturally' infertile; her sterilisation is ordered. It is presented in nightmarish flashbacks indebted to the horror genre. It is horrific and invasive: a condemnation of governmental and societal efforts to control female fertility. Whedon has previously explored issues of female bodily autonomy and control, and received backlash. *Dollhouse* dealt with control via sexual manipulation, and Whedon acknowledged the difficulty in these depictions: '"when you're dealing with fantasies, particularly sexual ones [...] you're not going to be doing things that are perfectly [that is, politically] correct"' (Telotte 2014, 92); delicacy is required. Nevertheless, critics often view such efforts 'as being exploitative, rather than the show being a story of exploitation' (Coker 2010, 226). If Whedon left his female characters as victims such criticism would be valid, but he creates 'a powerful vision of a woman's ability […] to overcome [...] cultural programming' (Telotte 2014, 94). Whedon's work is invested in empowering heroic women (Moore 2012); yet his more

complex work implores an audience to remember that 'it is just as important to discussing the troubling implications and reality of […] disempowerment as it is […] empowerment' (Zhang 2012, 406), and it is within the latter context *Ultron* exists. Natasha's story is of disempowerment, yet the aim is not to punitively punish in a gendered manner, rather it is to question the nature of societal governance of female bodies before offering a final, optimistic, transcendence. Natasha is distressed by her forced sterilisation, but it does not define her: she finishes the narrative a hero; Banner does not. She rejects Banner's pleas to escape: the 'job's not finished' she reminds Banner, and prompts him to 'go be a hero', transcending claims of biological essentialism.

This transcendence provides the final link between evolution and humanity. Overall, *Ultron* forwards a humanist view, advocating faith in humanity, granting individuals control of their personhood. This championing of humanity's power runs throughout Whedon's work: 'at the core of Whedon's worldview […] is [...] faith […] in humanity' (West 2012, 266). Before the final showdown with Ultron, Captain America (Chris Evans) states this endeavour is about more than victory, it is about 'whether [Ultron is] right', whether they are monsters. Hawkeye supports this, informing Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olson) it 'doesn't matter what you did, what you were [...] you're an Avenger': *Ultron* acknowledges and addresses the abuses, manipulations and commodification of bodies, particularly female bodies, but allows its characters to transcend the subsequent trauma and become heroic. The narrative acknowledges its heroes' potential 'monstrosity', but denies limited definitions: Natasha ends the narrative an Avenger, despite attempts to control her.

Fury Road: A Feminist Masterpiece?

If the reproductive politics of *Ultron* are interpretable, *Mad Max: Fury Road's* appear unequivocal. *Fury Road's* feminist credentials are self-evident; nevertheless, a summary of ideological points is necessary. *Fury Road* offers a horrifying image of a possible future in which women's greatest threat is men. All female bodies are commodified: 'desirable' women are wives and breeders for warlord Imortan Joe; older, overweight women are pumped for breastmilk; the scarred War Boys are fodder. With the aid of Imperator Furiosa and the previously captured, somewhat reluctant, Max (Tom Hardy), Joe's wives attempt escape, and daub their cell walls with slogans which state their autonomy: 'We are not things'. The wives reject claims of ownership and are willing to die for freedom. *Fury Road* depicts the regime's brutality and whilst it does not show sexual assault, it depicts a bloody caesarean carried out with a butcher's knife. The foetus and mother perish, but the butchery is merely referred to as a 'crying shame'. The film closes with Joe slain, his regime overthrown, and Furiosa and those left of Joe's wives riding triumphantly to liberate others. It is relevant the revolution is led by women and children as they are most vulnerable to exploitation. The ending defies stereotype with Max disappearing whilst Furiosa is elevated, the implication being she will rule. Narratives often 'end by denying [women] the male hero's ultimate goal: political authority wielded to reform and empower' (Crosby 2004, 154). *Fury Road* depicts women,

despite their enslavement, collectively overthrowing their (male) rulers and achieving liberation; it is unsurprising it was applauded as a feminist masterpiece.

Nevertheless, *Fury Road's* feminist credentials are not indisputable. Firstly, it adheres to Hollywood's tendency to show unrealistic images of pregnancy: Angharad, the most heavily pregnant wife, is played by a Victoria's Secret model, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. Despite being but a month from full term, the only indication of pregnancy is a tiny, svelte bump, indicating a reluctance to engage with pregnancy's physicality. This desire to depict only 'beautiful' pregnancies, and thus 'beautiful' women, is demonstrated throughout *Fury Road*. The scene in which women are pumped for breast milk evidences this: men drink this milk and whilst this is done to mark them grotesque, that point hinges on a sexist association of a natural process with the abject. Moreover, the camera lingers on the overweight women's excess flesh, confusing what is meant to be considered grotesque: the men drinking the milk, or the overweight women. Conflictingly, the wives' physical beauty is emphasised: midway through their escape bid, with their captors in pursuit, a gratuitous scene reminiscent of a sexually charged car wash is shown. The women are depicted wet, clad only in white, translucent underwear. The apparent message is women may demand bodily autonomy, but only if the bodies making the demand are 'acceptable'. Pregnancy may be joyful, but only if it is homogenised: the physical reality of reproduction remains uncomfortable; women may not be things, but they must be beautiful.

Furthermore, *Fury Road* cannot shake the biological essentialism linking femininity, motherhood, and nature. Such ideologies have historically dogged fantastical genres (Conrad 2011), reinforcing the association between femininity and motherhood as a source of identity, and encouraging an unachievable biological hierarchy. The symbolism and dramatics of an old, mortally wounded woman handing seeds to a younger woman confirms the film's assertion fertility is a female business. This demarcation of fertility as a 'female' business, however, is not inclusive of all variations of femininity: the seed passing scene may be read as a generational sharing of a specifically female knowledge, but could also be read as a regressive rejection of older women's involvement with fertility. If it is accepted *Fury Road* adheres to, and promotes, a culturally 'acceptable' – namely youthful and beautiful – image of fertility and pregnancy, this scene parallels societal fears which equate 'older' women with infertility, whilst simultaneously branding 'older' women monstrous should they desire, or have the physical capacity, to bear a child.

Correspondingly, the valorisation of women's special relationship with nature and motherhood could be more acceptable if Fury Road endeavoured as expressly to show pregnancy's physical realities as it did the female bodies' exploitation. It could also be more acceptable if the film depicted infertility and loss explicitly; the only references to either are Joe's frustration at the loss of a 'viable' son, his disfigured sons, and the mother/Earth/woman imagery which pervades the narrative. Infertility is an abstract idea in *Fury Road*: acknowledged yet lacking depth, secondary to championing of female autonomy. Perhaps the focus on autonomy is responsible for this: female autonomy is only encouraged whilst

functioning within accepted societal bounds which do not include consideration of infertility. Moreover, autonomy presumes the capacity to make choices: women are implored to control their reproductive capacities, enjoying both sexual liberation and an eventual family unit, but this formulation fails to account for women unable to make such choices. Choice narratives offer a false impression of absolute control therefore creating an inability to adequately respond to, or even acknowledge, situations in which this falsity is laid bare. The mantra 'we are not things' has revolutionary appeal, but should we be applauding, with regards to reproduction, mere assertions of personhood as the best women can hope for?

To conclude, *Age of Ultron* and *Fury Road* are flawed, but each forwards critiques of male, or governmental, control of female bodies, particularly in relation to reproduction and infertility. They are complimentary narratives: *Fury Road* is an empowering fantasy concerning the dismantlement of a totalitarian patriarchy, whilst *Age of Ultron* explores the quiet horror of enforced sterility. However, the films do differ in narrative presentation: *Fury Road*'s empowerment narrative is explicit, whereas *Age of Ultron* is more implicit: Natasha's backstory is a subplot. Despite these variations, similarities remain: both narratives allow their women to transcend the fate determined for them by their bodies and society; both women are heroic; and both end their narratives triumphant. So, the question remains: why the differing critical responses? This article contends there are three primary reasons: authorship and industry, 'tough' female characters, and the hangover of postfeminist leanings within contemporary feminist discourse.

Authors, Industry and Marvel's Women Problem

Much has been made of *Ultron's* thematic links to Whedon's other output, particularly those projects Whedon contributed to as a writer, producer, or director. Whilst one can overstate an author's capacity to shape a text, Whedon's role as writer and director, and the themes running throughout his work, suggest his ideologies impact texts he works on. Whedon's feminist credentials are documented: Whedon conceived *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a reaction to 'male violence against women in horror' (Earl 2004) mirroring artistic intent with activism 'in organisations such as Equality Now' (Wilcox & Cochran 2010, 9). A self-identifying feminist author may still produce a regressive female character; however, the label 'feminist' ensures greater scrutiny. As there is no consensus as to what defines a 'feminist' character, attempts to offer a complex vision of women and gendered issues will draw ire.

Furthermore, Whedon may be a feminist, but Marvel does not share his commitment; Marvel's reluctance to release a female led film indicates this. *Captain Marvel* (Marvel's first slated female led superhero film) has been delayed to allow for a Spiderman reboot (Eisenberg 2013) despite the nadir that was *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi 2007). Dissatisfaction with Marvel's sexism extended to the merchandising: *Ultron's* release saw the hashtag #WheresNatasha appear after consumers noted her near absence from official merchandising. Whedon addressed this issue, and Hollywood's reluctance to back female led projects thusly:

‘“Toymakers will tell you they won’t sell enough, and movie people will point to the two terrible superheroine movies that were made and say, ‘You see? It can’t be done.’”’ (Yamato 2014)

If Whedon received scrutiny due to his feminist stance, and was limited by a studio system apparently reluctant to engage with gender representation, George Miller was comparatively unconstrained. One may expect a film concerned with male control and female autonomy would be scrutinised for having an all-male writing team, however *Fury Road* avoided this. This is partly attributable to Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, who has worked with victims of rape and sexual abuse, who acted as an on-set consultant. Ensler’s role may have been limited (she spent ‘a week’ (Dockterman, 2015) on set), but her presence adds feminist credibility which depresses criticism. One may cynically suggest Ensler’s presence was tokenistic, but it did help elevate the text beyond reproach. Issues of franchise and audience expectation are also relevant: both films were anticipated returns of popular franchises, but arguably *Fury Road* did not have the ‘baggage’ of incredibly high audience expectation, and the pressure of contributing to an expansive ‘super franchise’. Moreover, the *Mad Max* franchise is typically considered ‘masculinist’ escapist fantasy, leading to the presumption of a smaller female audience, as well as lowering expectations of female representation, thus creating favourable conditions for a ‘surprise’ feminist film. Seemingly, Whedon’s activism and feminist concerns added to the aforementioned ‘baggage’ making outright critical and fan praise potentially unachievable. Hence, if Whedon’s feminism clashed with Marvel’s sexism, creating ambiguity which invites criticism, Miller’s high-octane tale of emancipation paired with its legitimising feminist consultancy, suffered no such issues.

Hollywood’s ‘Tough Women’

Natasha’s and Furiosa’s characterisations also require consideration. Both may be considered action heroines which, whilst a staple character of Hollywood cinema, remains problematic: some critics say action heroines represent a feminist ideal, whilst others warn ‘“the mere borrowing, by a female character, of […] masculine traits does not […] lead to a representation of equality”’ (Cornea in Conrad 2011, 91). Indeed, they are either considered ‘pseudo males’ or, contradictorily, decried for expressing emotion, therefore undermining their transgressive potential, creating a double standard. These ‘masculinised’ figures must be feminised to be more acceptable yet this feminisation invites further criticism. As Tasker indicates, action heroes are granted the luxury of the interplay ‘of vulnerability and strength [as] characteristic’ (Hills 1999, 43), whilst action heroines must neither be too masculine nor too feminine, and consequently are rarely anything.

In light of this impossible standard, Natasha arguably faced greater backlash because of the depth and nature of her expressed vulnerability; not only was Natasha emotionally vulnerable, she also admitted to a gendered vulnerability. *Fury Road* allows Furiosa one emotional outpouring in which she walks off, drops to her knees and screams, but this

expression of despair carries not the same 'feminine' sensibilities as admitting a desire for a family. Nevertheless, accepting that 'feminising' a 'masculinised' character limits their transgressive potential implies an acceptance of a male/female dichotomy and the implicit hierarchy. Demanding female characters adhere to the emotionally stunted standard set by most male action heroes simultaneously valorises this standard, whilst establishing a standard female characters cannot attain. Victimhood is used to contain women, but both films allow their male heroes fallibility. Max is haunted by visions of those he failed to save, providing a trauma-based motivation for his actions, whilst Tony is depicted as acting from a misplaced drive to protect his team. In each instance, emotional fallout from trauma rather than logic is a prime motivator. This is a thematic constant for Marvel: *Iron Man 3's* (Black, 2013) narrative examines PTSD and anxiety, for which it was applauded (Lewis 2013). Yet, there remains a reluctance to see women as flawed, which is exacerbated by films with one main female character, ensuring she is expected to be representative of all women. Natasha's expression of a female vulnerability, and feminism's aforementioned reticence to acknowledge infertility's impact, renders her ripe for criticism, and indicates gendered binarisms' enduring appeal.

Feminism, Empowerment, and Individuation

Finally, it would appear a disconnect between academic discussions of infertility and pregnancy and the lived reality of women remains. The deconstruction of the biological, nuclear family and the acceptance of alternative familial set-ups is desirable, but such utopic visions fail to account for the emotional reality of family; the presumed emotional connection associated with biological offspring. The biological essentialism implicit in marking motherhood as femininity's foundation is problematic, yet there remains an 'ideological connection between biological and social parenthood' (Gimenez 1991, 345); societal assumptions equate biological parenthood with parenthood. Whilst ever 'most women […] adhere to a biologically based concept of motherhood' (ibid), it is unlikely societal views will alter. The idea that concepts of 'motherhood' are socially and politically motivated, created, and maintained may be accepted in academia, but this does not account for many women's experiences.

Natasha's self-loathing and belief her infertility discounts her from love and family may appear regressive, especially when considering her independent and resilient characterisation. This tendency to use motherhood to explain female characters frustrates: it equates motherhood with femininity so implicitly it ensures any deviation from, rejection of, or physical incapacity to become a mother is considered a personal failure, which renders an individual 'less' than a woman. Feminism has fought for woman's right not to be defined by her capacity or desire to procreate so whilst ever the stigma regarding childless women endures such characterisations will irritate. However, a binarism between women who raise children and those who do not halts progress and limits debate. It creates a silence around reproductive issues that more regressive, aggressive voices fill, leaving those who suffer reproduction-related trauma with little support. In creating and perpetuating this binarism,

these discussions ensure independent, capable women like Natasha are not women who should or do want children. 'Mothers' become a particular type of woman, and expressing a desire to have children can, if you are not considered this type of woman, become a transgressive act. Such descriptions sit at extremes of the debate, but a lack of discourse encourages extremes.

This issue is complicated by the residual hangover of post feminism. Post feminism advocates empowerment, but typically lacks political engagement: 'drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed […] as a kind of substitute for feminism' (McRobbie 2009, 1). This focus on individuation encouraged feminism's dismantling and a retreat to the traditionally 'feminine' 'as though to say "thank goodness, girls can be girls again, that time of dourness and censoriousness is over"' (McRobbie 2009, 8). Whilst feminism is currently attracting renewed interest, and potentially entering a 'fourth wave' (Cochrane 2014), individuation remains a part of millennial feminism. The 'choices', such as the rejection of roles as wife and mother, may appear more radical, and feminism may again appear political, but disconnects between 'types' of women endure. In this context, Furiosa enacts an empowering revenge fantasy conforming to Tasker and Negra's description of post feminism as generating, and drawing strength from, 'buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic, personal empowerment' (Tasker and Negra 2007, 3). *Ultron* forwards a nuanced representation of governmental interference in female bodies, and the consequent emotional fallout. Both films engage with empowerment and transcendence, the difference comes from their prioritisations of glorious revenge or generalised uncertainty.

There remains, however, a space for each narrative. Both demonise male control over female bodies; both demonstrate the lengths patriarchy will go to to deny women's autonomy; both acknowledge the role of women's reproductive capacity in terms of their exploitation and commodification; and both allow their women to emerge triumphant. The primary differences stem from their function: *Fury Road* is an epic fantasy, which allows women to indulge their feminist fantasies, which is important. *Ultron* is grounded in moral and ethical uncertainty which precludes it from fist pumping positivity. However, such narratives need not compete for the title of 'Most Feminist'. Jointly, they allow women to consider what is possible, whilst reminding them of the reality that demands consideration of such possibilities.

References

Battis, J. (2005) *Bloody Relations: Chosen Families in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel*. McFarland, Jefferson.

Clark, K., & Bennett, T. (2015) 'How Avengers: Age of Ultron Dropped the Ball with Black Widow'. Blastr [Online] 4 May. Available at < http://www.blastr.com/2015-5-4/how-avengers-age-ultron-dropped-ball-black-widow > [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Cochrane, K. (2014) *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Forth Wave of Feminism*. Guardian Books: London

Coker, C. (2010) 'Exploitation of Bodies and Minds in Season 1 of Dollhouse' in Waggoner, E. (ed), *Sexual Rhetoric in the Works of Joss Whedon.* McFarland, London. pp. 227 – 237.

Conrad, D. (2011) 'Femmes Futures: One Hundred Years of Female Representation in SF Cinema'. *Science Fiction Film and Television,* 4, 1, 79 – 99

Crosby, S. (2004) 'The Cruellest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines' in Inness, S., (ed.) *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture.* Palgrave Macmillan: New York. pp. 153 – 181.

Doane, M. (2000) 'Technophilia: Technology, Representation and the Feminine' in Kirkup, G., Janes, L., Woodward, K. & Hovenden, F. (eds.), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Routledge: London

Dockterman, E. (2015) 'Vagina Monologues Writer Eve Ensler: How Mad Max: Fury Road Became a "Feminist Action Film"'. *Time* [Online] 7 May. Available at < http://time.com/3850323/mad-max-fury-road-eve-ensler-feminist/>. [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Ellis-West, J. (2011) 'Technology Knows Best: The Cultural Work of Hospital Birth in 21st Century Film'. *Literature and Medicine*, 29, No.1,104 – 126.

Gimenez, M. (1991) 'The Mode of Reproduction in Transition: A Marxist Feminist Analysis of the Effects of Reproductive Technologies'*. Gender and Society*, 5, No.3, 334 – 350.

Hills, E. (1999) 'From 'Figurative males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema'. Screen, 40, No.1, 38 – 50.

Inness, S. (1999) *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture.* University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia

Johnson, K., & Simon, R. (2012) 'Women's Attitudes Toward Biomedical Technology for Infertility: The Case for Technological Salience'. *Gender & Society*, 26, No.2. 261 – 289.

Layne, L. (1997) 'Breaking the Silence: An Agenda for a Feminist Discourse of Pregnancy Loss'. *Feminist Studies*, 23, No.2, 289 – 315.

Lewis, E. (2013) 'Iron Man 3 and Panic Attacks'. *Den of Geek* [Online] 7 May. Available at < http://www.denofgeek.us/movies/iron-man-3/111596/iron-man-3-and-panic-attacks > [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Mcrobbie, A. (2008) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage: London.

Moore, R. (2012) 'Introduction: Why Cast a Spotlight on Joss Whedon?' in Money, M. A., (ed), *Joss Whedon: The Complete Collection*. Titan Books: London. pp. 11 - 21.

Oliver, K. (2012) *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Hollywood Films*. Columbia University Press: New York.

Rapp, R. (2001) 'Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory'. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly,*15, No.4, 466 – 477.

Smith, K. (2015) 'Why Mad Max: Fury Road' is the feminist picture of the year'. *New York Post* [Online]. 14 May. Available at < http://nypost.com/2015/05/14/why-mad-max-fury-road-is-the-feminist-picture-of-the-year/> [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Stern, M. (2015) 'Avengers: Age of Ultron's Black Widow Disgrace'. The Daily Beast [Online]. 5 May. Available at < http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/05/avengers-age-of-ultron-s-black-widow-disgrace.html > [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Tasker, Y. & Negra, D. (2007) Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture: Duke University Press: London.

Telotte, J. P. (2014) *Science Fiction TV*. Routledge: London.

Tremain, S. (2006) 'Reproductive Freedom, Self-Regulation, and the Government of Impairment in Utero'. *Hypatia*, 21, No.1, 35 – 53.

Valenti, J. (2015) 'Sexists are scared of Mad Max because it is a call to dismantle patriarchies'. *Guardian* [Online] 27 May. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/27/sexists-are-scared-of-mad-max-because-it-is-a-call-to-dismantle-patriarchies> [Accessed 3 March 2016]

West, C. (2012) 'Heroic Humanism and Humanistic Heroism in Joss Whedon's Shows' in Money, M. A., (ed), *Joss Whedon: The Complete Collection*. Titan Books: London. pp. 264 – 270.
Wilcox, R., & Cochran, T. (2010) '"Good Myth": Joss Whedon's Further Worlds' in Wilcox, R., & Cochran., T (eds.), *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. I.B. Tauris: London. pp. 1 – 11.

Woerner, M. & Trendacosta, K. (2015) 'Black Widow: This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things'. *IO9* [Online] 5 May. Available at < http://io9.gizmodo.com/black-widow-this-is-why-we-can-t-have-nice-things-1702333037?trending_test_b&utm_expid=66866090-62.YkETBcIMTk2uX1oytHipyg.2&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vox.com%2F2015%2F5%2F11%2F8582081%2Favengers-age-of-ultron-joss-whedon> [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Yamato, J. (2015) 'The Avengers' Black Widow Problem: How Marvel Slut-Shamed Their Most Badass Superheroine'. The Daily Beast [Online] 28 April. Available at < http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/28/the-avengers-black-widow-problem-how-marvel-slut-shamed-their-most-badass-superheroine.html> [Accessed 3 March 2016]

Zhang, A. (2012) 'Buffy and Dollhouse: Visions of Female Empowerment and Disempowerment' in Money, M. A., (ed), *Joss Whedon: The Complete Collection*. Titan Books: London. pp. 401 – 407.

Filmography

Avengers: Age of Ultron [2015]. Directed by Joss Whedon. USA: Marvel Studios.

Mad Max: Fury Road [2015]. Directed by George Miller. USA: Warner Brothers.

Iron Man 3 [2013]. Directed by Shane Black. USA: Marvel Studios.

Juno [2007]. Directed by Jason Reitman. USA: 20TH Century Fox.

Knocked Up [2007]. Directed by Judd Apatow. USA: Universal Pictures.

Spider-Man 3 [2007]. Directed by Sam Raimi. USA: Columbia Pictures.

Look Who's Talking [1989]. Directed by Amy Heckerling. USA: TriStar Pictures.

She's Having a Baby [1988]. Directed by John Hughes. USA: Hughes Entertainment

Rosemary's Baby [1968]. Directed by Roman Polanski. USA: William Castle Productions.

Emily Rowson is a PhD candidate at Northumbria University, Newcastle. Her current research is primarily concerned with gendered identities, sexualities, and bodies in science fiction film and television. She has presented papers on the potential for a mutually beneficial conversation between feminist theory and science fiction media, depictions of female monstrosity within *Doctor Who*, and currently works on the construction of gendered bodies in British science fiction television.

Email: emily.rowson@northumbria.ac.uk

Revolting Animation: The Hierarchy of Masculinities in the Representation of Race and Male Same-Sex Desire in Adult Cartoons

IRENE FUBARA-MANUEL, *University of Sussex*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representations of race and male same-sex desire portrayed by black gay male characters on the adult animated television show, *The Boondocks* (2005). Centralizing its analysis of *The Boondocks* as a canonical text of black gay representation within animation, this paper highlights the signs of the male matriarch, booty warrior, and homothug and their iterations in three other animated TV shows—*The Cleveland Show* (2009), *American Dad!* (2005), and *Chozen* (2014). This article posits that these signs connote the ideology of hegemonic masculinity and its racial ordering. Drawing on Halberstam's (2011) 'revolting animation', Ngai's (2005) 'animatedness', and Wells' (1998) 'hierarchies of masculinities', this article addresses these contradicting signs of black gay masculinities within the aforementioned animated television shows, situating them within respective sexual and racial politics in the United States.

KEYWORDS

Hegemonic masculinity, animation, representation, race, sexuality

In the chapter addressing the genealogy of representation in animation, Animation Studies scholar Paul Wells (1998) coins the term 'the hierarchy of masculinity' (194) to describe the supremacy of white masculinity represented in the 1943 animated short film *Jungle Drums,* where Superman battles Nazis and dark-skinned natives to rescue Lois Lane. Attesting to this persistent hierarchy, contemporary scholars outside of Animation Studies, such as Richard King, Carmen Lugo-Lugo, and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) and Sianne Ngai (2005), address the imperialist, racist and heterosexist discourses injected into animation. Judith Halberstam (2011), however, notes these racialised discourses within animation, but also praises the genre for its radical potential to stage revolts. As such, this article, addresses the marginalisation of black gay masculinities within animation, borrowing from Ngai's (2005) theory of 'animatedness' and Halberstam's (2011) theory of 'animated revolt' to address the system of hegemonic masculinity in animation.

To be '"animated" in American culture is to be racialized in some way', Ngai (2005, 95) notes, as the process of animation highlights the agency of the animator over the object 'being moved' (91). This conceptualisation of animatedness doubly connotes a stereotypical representation of racialised characters as 'excessive'. Canonising the 1999 television show *The PJ's* as 'the first primetime program in American television history to feature a completely non-white, non-middle class, and non-live action cast' (102), Ngai highlights excess in *The PJ's* through the socio-economic disenfranchisement of its characters and its 'ugly' character design. By incorporating this excess, similar to a number of films and

television programs this article explores, *The PJ's* subverts the racial stereotypes it deploys by infusing critical discourse into them. These characterisations of excess in this 1990s TV show also have gendered and sexualised implications. Ralph Bakshi, for example, in his 1975 cult classic, *Coonskin,* caricatures a group of gay brothers as incestuous, villainous, drag queens. A controversial piece, which incited protests from the Congress of Racial Equality (Cohen 2004), this film uses live action and animation to satirise Disney's representation of black people as happy slaves in *Song of the South* (1946) or chuckin' and jivin' Negros in *Dumbo* (1941). By appropriating the characters Brother Rabbit, Brother Bear, and Preacher Fox from *Song of the South* as streetwise radical pro-Black hustlers, Bakshi re-imagines these excessive racial stereotypes in the form of revolt.

As Halberstam (2011) illustrates, several animated films glorify the queer art of failure and 'revolt'. 'Pixarvolt', Halberstam names the type of animation, has created 'a new space for the imagining of alternatives' (2011, 48). The queer theorist elucidates, 'gender in these films is shifty and ambiguous [...]; sexualities are amorphous and polymorphous [...]; bodily ability is often at issue' (47-48). The films revolt against capitalism, (cis)genderism, heteronormativity, and the individualistic ideal of neoliberalism. Darting across several forms of animation, Halberstam highlights the feminist utopia within stop animation *Chicken Run* (2000); the homoeroticism between SpongeBob and Patrick in the 2D animated Nickelodeon series *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999); and queer constructive birthing of a baby robot in *Robots* (2005). Un-revolting animation, Halberstam extricates, places the self-actualised individual above the diverse collective, prioritising the narrative of family and romance over radical possibilities.

In this sense, this article offers a semiotic textual analysis of animated revolt against hegemonic masculinity located within its central text—*The Boondocks* (2005). It also reads three other animated adult television programs—*Chozen* (2014), *American Dad!* (2005), and *The Cleveland Show* (*TCS*) (2009)—for their iterations of the signs and radical possibilities of black gay gender performance in adult animation. First laying out its choice of texts and clarifying the centralisation of *The Boondocks*, it then turns its direction to an analysis of these TV shows. Expanding on the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), this article maps the position of black gay men within these texts. It addresses some issues in the political economy that frame this positionality and the representations of black and gay masculinities in the media at large. On the one hand, mapping out moments of animated revolt against heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, while on the other, analysing moments of complicity to this system, this article illustrates the complex, often contradicting, representations of black gay masculinity within animation and the implications of these representations within the larger hegemonic system.

Black Gay Men and Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Raewyn Connell (2005), definitions of masculinity either assign core cultural value, a statistical commonality or an aspirational norm as the definition of masculinity. Connell explains masculinity as a 'place in gender relations, the practices through which men

and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in the bodily experience, personality and culture' (2005, 71). Although Connell's definition does not take into account the masculinity within women, Halberstam (1998) has skilfully expounded on female masculinity. Connell, however, emphasises the relation of masculinities within the gender order as: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginal. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (2005, 77). As this gender relation is indeed hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, it does not necessarily operate through the exertion of brute force. Instead, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state, it works through social consent, remains mutable, while staying accessible to only a small number of men.

Within this order of gender relations, gay masculinities are subordinated, black masculinities, are marginalized and middle class, heterosexual masculinities are complicit to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). Writers, such as bell hooks (1994) and Patricia Hill Collins (2004) attest to this hierarchal ordering of masculinity. In this vein, sexuality, race, and class all function to take from or add to one's distance to hegemonic masculinity. Within the contemporary context, hegemonic masculinity is accessible only to white, middle and upper-class, heterosexual men, and those with marginalised identities are required to gain limited access to this hegemonic masculinity through complex negotiation of gender, racial and class practices. hooks (1994) describes one of such negotiation using the example of black gangsta rappers in hip-hop culture. hooks states that, within white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, 'young black males labour in the plantation of misogyny and sexism to produce gangsta rap' (1994, 123) for access to power, capital and hegemonic masculinity. Within this system, black manhood is simultaneously constructed within a vacuum of poverty, violence, and misogyny, which is commodified and consumed through gangsta rap.

For gay men, this misogyny takes the form of distastes towards effeminate gay men or men who act as women (Connell 2005). In this sense, according to Connell (2005), gay men are not simply attracted to male bodies but also attracted to masculinity, thereby complicating their relation to masculinity. On one hand, in their attraction to masculinity, gay men eschew femininity. On the other hand their attraction to masculinity and failure to dominate women through sexual conquest revokes their own masculinity. In addition to this, dominant patriarchal culture, according to Connell constructs gay male sexuality as effeminacy—the lack of masculinity. Inferring from this, in line with Collins' (2004) argument, it can be argued that the construction of black men as not real men and gay men as effeminate leads to the construction of black gay men as weak and effeminate. However, in many ways this inference is invalid.

As art historian Kobena Mercer (1994) states, black masculinity is 'a key site of ideological representation upon which the nation's crisis comes to be dramatized, demonized and dealt with' (160). Taking this into account it is important to note Frantz Fanon's iteration that '[t]he Negro is taken as a terrifying penis' (2008, 136). Relating this to Mercer, then, Collins

(2004) notes that the media represent black masculinity in ways of hypermasculinising black men as criminals or athletes, or feminising them as sissies or sidekicks. On the one hand is the fear of this terrifying penis and on the other is its symbolic castration or feminisation to control this genital boogeyman. Noting these scholars' analysis of the representation of black men, it is comprehensible why this contradicting view of black men as hypermasculine and effeminate exists.

These representations are similar to those of gay men. Film historian Vito Russo (1987) notes that within the guidelines of the 1930s to late 1960s Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code), no perverted act in American cinema could escape censoring. Therefore, filmmakers hid their characters' sexuality under subtext—gay men were coded as sissies, mama's boys or pathological killers. After the Stonewall riots and the decriminalisation of homosexuality, gay men became more visible in the media (Gross 2001). However, as media representations of AIDS as the 'gay plague' (Mercer 1994, 154) increased, anxieties about the disease coalesced into homophobia. As Martin Levine and Michael Kimmel (1998) note, gay men 'had a limited range of stigmatized identities from which to choose, including "hopeless neurotics", "moral degenerate", and "nelly queens"' (20), which most men subverted by acting similar to straight men. Mercer (1994) describes this 'clone look, in which gay men adopted very "straight" signifiers of masculinity' (132), noting the racist and fascist connotations within this new aesthetic.

Within this new culture of gay masculinities, race became a defining characteristic of closeness to hegemonic masculinity. Following Ellen Degeneres' coming out and the popularity of *Will and Grace* (1998), Streitmatter (2009) notes, positive images of white gay men flourished. The media portrayed these gay men as attractive, tasteful, and successful. As advertisers caught on to a demographic of gay male couples with dual incomes and no kids (DINKs), they began marketing directly to this population. Black queer scholar Dwight McBride (2005) notes that white gay men's brand loyalty to Abercrombie and Fitch symbolically de-valued blackness as A&F's racism in its workplace policies transferred to its erasure of blackness in its catalogues. Therefore, underneath this white middle class hetero/homonormative aesthetic was the unacknowledged culture of racism in the gay community. Consequentially, when black men finally graced Abercrombie's catalogue, they depicted ghettoised hypermasculinity, thus igniting the racial fantasies of the 'homothug' (McBride 2005, 88) or 'trade' (102) within gay culture. Thus, the racial representation of black men as criminals or athletes doubly proliferated within mainstream and gay culture, pervading through live action and animation.

Forbidden Cartoons: From *The Boondocks* (2005) to *Chozen* (2014)

Adult animation and LGBT representation have a key similarity that ties them together. While Karl Cohen (2004) notes that the strict moral guidelines of the Hays Code censored animators from depicting controversial characters, Russo (1987) describes the ways in which these moral guidelines erased LGBT representation by banning the depiction of sexual romance outside of a heterosexual matrimonial context. From the 1930s to its elimination in

the late 1960s, the Hays Code attempted to control representation in American media. For animators, that meant the scrutiny of their work from the stage of character design and illustrating to the screening of their pieces. 'Forbidden animation', Karl Cohen terms the cartoons that pushed the boundary of censorship within and outside the enforcement of this code. Cohen (2004) places shows such as the family sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989) alongside Bakshi's contentious *Coonskin* (1975) for its status as the first cartoon to swear on television and push the boundary of censorship. For Cohen (2004) censorship comes in many forms—morality policing censorship morphed to political correctness censorship. However, following the number of successful animated television shows, these forbidden animations grew in number and popularity, now having a whole network—Adult Swim—dedicated to their broadcast.

One of the few animated programs in which the n-word (Fitzpatrick 2011) is used liberally, the forbidden cartoon *The Boondocks* is an anime-style 2D Adult Swim television show that ran for four seasons. The show follows the lives of two black brothers who moved from a multi-ethnic Chicago neighborhood with their grandfather to the predominantly white suburbs of Woodcrest. Most of their adventures stem from failure to fit into the white suburban world. This show reflects aspects of satirised black revolt from the perspective of the homeboy-gangster-rap-enthusiast Riley; his large-Afro-headed-socially-conscious brother Huey Freeman; and their grandfather, the loud-mouthed self-proclaimed Civil Rights veteran Robert Freeman (also know as Grand Dad). Focusing on these three main characters, the award-winning satire reflects the systemic racism and subjugation of black people. It satirises events in pop culture and hip-hop culture, all the while re-contextualising historical racist tropes within the contemporary American suburb. Noting its penchant for controversial commentary on pop culture, *Time* magazine ranks it number six in a list of ten animated films and programs (Fitzpatrick 2011). For its erudite analysis of racial issues in America, the series is a canonical text in animation. Within the context of this article it proves its position as a definitive text as it admirably foreshadows most of the signs of black gay men reified in other adult animation television shows in popular culture. However, within *The Boondocks*, the key texts of focus will be the episodes that represent black gay characters or male-male sexual desire in their dominant storyline.

American Dad!, a Seth MacFarlane project, chronicles the life of Stan Smith, conservative CIA agent. As a father figure, most of the episodes address the Stan's anxieties of masculinity as he relates with his nuclear family made up of his wife, two children, and the pansexual, gender-bending alien with a multiple personalities Roger. Aside from Roger, this television show has a number of gay and bisexual men in its character roster. Amongst these characters are the Smiths' neighbors, the gay couple Terry Bates and Greg Corbin; Stan's boss and Deputy Director of the CIA, Avery Bullock (voiced by Patrick Stewart); and Steve's high school principal, Brian Lewis. Of all these characters, Brian Lewis is the only black person in the list. His actions are therefore frequently racialised. The focal point of the analysis of Brian Lewis' masculinity in this article is the episode in which he reunites with his prison partner.

Another racialised MacFarlane character, Cleveland Brown from *The Cleveland Show*, has been the subject of debate. With its eponymous character voiced by a white actor, Mike Henry, and its origins in *Family Guy* (1999), this show bears criticism as '*Family Guy* in blackface' (McWhorter 2009). It highlights another racial issue in the animation industry, wherein white voice actors play black characters. In the documentary, *I Know That Voice* (2013), Gary Anthony Williams and Cedric Yarborough (both black voice actors on *The Boondocks*) address this issue. While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the racial representation in the animation industry, the documentary investigates what informs these white voice actors' representation of races (and sexualities) other than theirs. The four seasons of *The Cleveland Show* concentrate on Cleveland Brown's relocation from Quahog to a southern suburb in Stoolbend, Virginia. Cleveland's mission in Stoolbend is partly one of proving that he is a 'real man' on his own accord as the patriarch in his new blended family consisting of his new wife Donna and their children (Carter 2010). The focal text within this article is the episode in which the only black gay recurring character—Donna's mother figure—Auntie Momma/Uncle Kevin joins the family.

Drawing close similarities to *The Boondocks*, *Chozen* is a satire on hip-hop culture, its objectification of women and its anxieties concerning male-same sex desire (Hill 2009). Focusing on the recently released ex-convict, Phillip "Chozen" Cullens, this program chronicles this gay white man adapting to life outside of the prison as he attempts to dethrone the most influential rapper of his time (and childhood friend-turned-enemy), Phantasm, who is voiced by legendary rapper, Method Man. As noted in Andres Tardio's (2014) article, this program did not air without some contentions from the hip-hop community. Most criticism went towards the rapper Method Man for his support of this gay-themed cartoon. Although Method Man succeeded in thwarting off the homophobia within these contentions, the producers and cast of this show never address this issue of race and appropriation within Chozen (Halterman 2014). While the show only lasted for one season, the episode depicting Chozen's relationship with the white frat boy Hunter in contrast with his former prison partner Jamal offers a tangible opportunity to analyse the juxtaposition of race and hegemonic masculinity within the gay community.

Signs of Hegemony: Male Matriarchs, Booty Warriors, and Homo-Thugs

The Boondocks episode 'Pause' portrays the three oft-characterised signs of black gay men in adult animation. The matriarch personified by the character Winston Jerome/Ma Dukes; the booty warrior personified by a prisoner with the same alias; and the homothug, personified by rapper Gangstalicious. These characters, as will be expanded on in this section, connote the subjugation of black masculinity in the system of hegemonic masculinity. As explained this section, the histories of the representation of these characters are rooted in earlier signs of black women, black men and gay men. The oldest sign out of this trio is that of the matriarch. Black matriarchy is simultaneously a myth (hooks, 1992) and a historically rooted (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) traces this black matriarchy to its origins back to the mammy slave-figure. The scholar differentiates them noting that while 'the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes.

As the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" Black mother' (75).

A drag rendition of this black matriarch, Ma Dukes characterises feminised 'excess' (Ngai 2005). She is the alter ego of Winston Jerome the leader of a homoerotic Christian theatre troupe and lampoon on the media powerhouse Tyler Perry. Similar to Perry, Jerome's success is based on his role as a black man playing a 'gun-toting, sassy, buxom mother figure' in her sexual prime (Crouse 2006, 2). Ma Dukes also draws from the genealogy of the drag matriarch, which includes Eddie Murphy's Grand Ma Klumps character in *Nutty Professor* (1996) and Martin Lawrence's eponymous character in *Big Momma's House* (2000). What then separates *The Boondocks'* satire of this pervasive trope is Jerome's deployment of drag to cover up his desire for men. Connecting this family of male matriarchs from Tyler Perry's Madea to Ma Dukes and to Auntie Momma in *The Cleveland Show*, LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant (2014) brilliantly asserts the queerphobia in *The Boondocks'* representation of Ma Dukes and *TCS*' depiction of Auntie Momma (Manigault-Bryant 2014, 172). Similar to Ma Dukes, Manigault-Bryant emphasises (2014), Auntie Momma uses drag as a cover to have sex with men. However, given her devotion to her niece Donna, Auntie Momma is truly maternal. The rambunctious elderly lady reveals to Cleveland that he (as Uncle Kevin) had to take on the role of Donna's mother figure and caretaker when her parents abandoned her. This performance of the good mother, however, is disrupted as Auntie Momma quickly becomes 'bad black mother' (Collins 2000) when she sleeps with Cleveland's married father, Freight Train, who is unaware that she is a man. Thus, Auntie Momma's queerness 'troubles the heteronormative black family' (Carter 2010, 504). Furthermore, she embodies 'excess' (Ngai 2005) not only in her sexuality but also in her gender-bending demeanor and catchphrase—'I'm outrageous'—which she says while simultaneously cutting the air.

Speaking to this excess is the moment where Auntie Momma simulates fellatio on a turkey leg at the family diner. Watching this confirms Cleveland's doubts that Auntie Momma and his father had sex. Filled with disgust, he projectile vomits three times. Freight Train replicates this reaction when Cleveland coyly informs him of Auntie Momma's secret. As Derrais Carter (2010) notes, 'Freight's reaction, just as Cleveland's, reinscribes Auntie Momma's difference as repulsive and ultimately an unsavory component of black family life' (507). However, her presence serves a purpose in the strengthening of hegemonic masculinity within the show. These aforementioned representations of black gay effeminacy coalesced into the male matriarch emphasise this reliance. However, within these representations of masculinity are aspects of misogyny against black womanhood. As hooks (1992) notes, the object of derision and scorn when a black man does drag for the white gaze is not the man himself but black women. As the critical scholar states '[t]hese televised images of black men in drag were never subversive; they helped sustain sexism and racism' (hooks 1992, 146).

The second common sign of black gay masculinity is that of the 'booty warrior'. An intersection of 'the myth of black rapist' (Davis 1983) and the disproportionately high number of black people in prison (Alexander 2010), this character is a materialisation of the anxieties about loss of masculinity through rape during incarceration. In the episode of *The*

Boondocks 'A Date with the Booty Warrior', the Freemans—Riley and Huey—go on a 'Scared Stiff' program after brawling with five other boys at school. Their neighbor, the middle-class lawyer Tom Dubois, who happens to be pathologically scared of prison rape, escorts the 'delinquent youth' to the maximum-security jail where they meet prisoners who all give proselytising speeches. Amongst these prisoners is the symbolisation of sexual 'excess' (Ngai 2005), The Booty Warrior, based on the Kentucky State prisoner Fleece Johnson portrayed in prison reality show *Lock Up* (2005). Similar to Fleece, The Booty Warrior takes a heightened form of pleasure from sexually assaulting other men. As, imitating Fleece, The Booty Warrior says, 'getting some booty is more important than eating food... it's more important than drinking water'. The Booty Warrior embodies what Angela Davis (1983) emphasises as the anxieties of the 'irrational world of racist ideology' (183). Davis (1983) periodises these anxieties sublimated into the construction of the black rapist to the early 1800s after the emancipation of slaves in America. This myth was created as a pretext for lynching black men. It concretised itself within the binary narrative of the white female victim and the animalistic sexually voracious black man. As shown in *The Boondocks* and *Lock Up,* this myth is still perpetuated in the media.

Furthermore, this myth intersects with stereotypes about gay men, as scholars posit that sexual activity within the prison system differs from sexual identity. Stephen Donaldson (2001) notes that 'booty bandits', as the writer terms them, may identify as heterosexual even while they 'engage in sexual coercion' of other men (120). The writer stresses that despite homophobic stereotypes of the 'aggressive homosexual' (121) that surround these booty bandits/warriors, the sexual coercion they exert is more about power and asserting masculinity than sexual preference. *The Boondocks* illustrates this when time comes for the prisoners to give their speeches. The men all assert that they have all been the victims and perpetrators of rape. However, the in following scenes where a riot erupts and the prisoners make a list of demands, their request for women instead of men highlights their sexual preference.

Indeed power plays an important role in the sexual activity and gender performance of imprisoned men. James Messerschmidt (2001) notes that prison rape offers a dynamic in understanding and interpreting masculine power hierarchies (68). In certain cases men often seek protection from more powerful inmates. Donaldson (2001) calls these 'protective relationships' (123) between 'daddies' and their 'punks'. In some cases, the writer states, when these prisoners within these pairs have longer sentences, they may have a ceremony signifying a matrimonial bond. *American Dad!* portrays this bond between Brian Lewis, the excessively deviant principal of Pearl Bailey High School, and his 'prison wife' Tracy Bryant. In 'The Worst Stan', the CIA agent unwittingly reunites Lewis with Tracy, as a gift for Lewis' heterosexual wedding to the school superintendent. On his return to the principal's life, Tracy divulges that by prison rules they were 'married' because Lewis beat up his last 'husband'. Therefore, Lewis would be unable marry the female school superintendent and settle into a 'normal' life free of sexual deviancy, crime and drugs. In this sense, similar to Auntie Momma, Tracy's presence revolts against the heteronormative order of the nuclear family. Even more so, Tracy describes their prison marriage as 'three years of wedded bliss'.

Feelings between Tracy and Lewis reignite, and the principal relapses to his former destructive patterns. Through a series of fights amongst the cast, Tracy becomes 'prison married' to Stan and finally the superintendent, with whom he later on has a child, thus concluding this story with the start of a heterosexual family.

The sign of the booty warrior converges at some points with the third sign—that of the homothug. As a racialised criminal, the booty warrior performs a 'black criminality [...] obsessed with domination-driven masculinity' (Jeffries 2008, 76). Birthed with the late 90s rise of gangster rap, Michael Jeffries (2008) notes, this 'thug' masculinity is a signification in hip-hop culture. Therefore, as Marc Lamont Hill (2009) posits, the 'thug' masculinity of the homothug does not necessarily signify 'thuggishness' in its form as racialised criminality. It instead, through the aforementioned system of signs, connotes an affiliation to hip-hop culture. As the writer states, 'homothug refers to a gay or bisexual male who identifies with the hypermasculine accouterments of mainstream hip-hop' (Hill 2009, 46). Hill deconstructs this word, noting its ironic combination of contradictory identities of the oft-feminised gay man and the hypermasculine thug. Hill establishes, '[a]s such, the homothug often represents a human punch line, a walking contradiction that could be looked to for easy insults and quick laughter' (46).

Relating back to Ngai's (2005) concept of 'animatedness' or excess to frame the depiction of the homothug in animation, this character is the convergence of two excesses—that of the 'nelly queen' (Levine and Kimmel 1998, 20) gay man and that of the 'hypermasculine' thug. Introduced in *The Boondocks'* 'The Story of Gangtsalicious 1', the character Gangstalicious typifies the 'down low' homothug gangster rapper. As Hill (2009) notes, the 'down low' man is one who is discrete about his sexuality. Staying on the 'down low', similar to doing sexual acts in prison, is a performance (Jason King as cited in Hill 2009). Following the association of gay men and HIV (as noted above in Mercer, 1994), this 'DL' man symbolizes the threat of disease, depravity, and destruction of the black family. As a satire of successful mainstream hip-hop artists, Gangstalicious highlights these tensions, including those tensions within hip-hop that support homosocial principles such as 'niggas over bitches' (Hill 2009, 49) while spouting homophobic lyrics in beef songs as a method of 'outing' allegedly gay artists.

In the second chapter of Gangstalicious' story, 'The Story of Ganstalicious 2', the show centres on his fears as a 'down low' gay rapper in hip-hop. In this episode, Gangstalicious attempts to dismiss the hip-hop video girl, who outs him in a tell-all book. By relying on his rendition of hip-hop's misogynist and homosocial creed, 'homies over hoes' (Hill 2009), Gangstalicious attempts to undermine this tattler. The damage, however, is done, as the hip-hop community begins to ostracise him. With this final layer, as Gangstalicious falls back on his boyfriend's support, the show reveals him as a vulnerable man who shares a healthy romantic relationship with another black man. Therefore, in this defining moment *The Boondocks* does not animate Gangstalicious' sexuality as excess. However, according to McBride's (2005) account of the rise of the representation of the homothug or his straight-acting down low counterpart, 'trade' within mainstream gay culture, it is debatable that

Gangstalicious' thug masculinity is a product of gay culture's commodification of the homothug as much as it is a product of hip-hop's fetishization of 'thug life' (Jeffries 2008).

This commodification of black identities 'makes it possible [...] for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness' (hooks 1992, 154). One of these instances of appropriation of a homothug appears in *Chozen*, whose eponymous character was raised in a middle class white family, but his proximity to black culture, through his friends Crisco and Ricky offers him an identification with this culture. His relationship with his ex-prison partner Jamal highlights his failure to interrogate his whiteness and privilege compared to his friends. Jamal, a black prisoner, after his release, visits Chozen, disrupting the status quo that the rapper has maintained with his non-convict friends. Subsequently, as the rapper and his new partner, Hunter (a lean white middle class frat boy whose style is reminiscent of Abercrombie and Fitch) are growing apart from each other, Jamal's presence serves to amend Chozen's ennui with Hunter. Due to Chozen's decision to perform at a minor gig with his friends instead of commit a robbery with Jamal the two men fight. Disrupting the fight, the police separate the men but Jamal head butts a police officer. For this assault, the police officers arrest Jamal who breaks out of the police car and dies from the four shots to his chest. Chozen does not mourn Jamal. Instead, in the next scene, Chozen and Hunter celebrate their anniversary at a restaurant.

Jamal's death situates him in the necropolitical order or allocation of death to people based on their marginality (Achille Mbembe 2003). As other marginal people—black people, queer people, and women—he lives across death worlds. In fact, the prison itself is a death world, spatially singled out far beyond borders where criminalised noncitizens reside. The allocation of death to Jamal becomes more evident in that despite Chozen being portrayed as a white man who is heavily influenced by hip-hop culture, his race, class, and position in the hierarchy of masculinity, allocates him a privilege that distances him from the enactment of necropolitics. While Chozen has more adventures, and settles into his hetero/homonormative relationship, Jamal merely becomes another dead black man. The expulsion of Jamal's 'excessive' (Ngai 2005) 'thug masculinity' (Hill 2009) refers back to Mercer's (1994) statement of hegemonic control of black masculinity and Davis' (1983) historical account of the lynching or murder of black men to assuage racial anxieties.

Black Queer Possibilities: Animatedness, Revolt, and Complicity

As this paper has previously addressed, the hierarchy of masculinity (Wells 1998) within adult animation has both racialised and sexualised implications for black gay men. Although the characters animated revolt in several manners, the narratives through which they are portrayed show the construction of black gay masculinity as a contradicting form of animated excess (Ngai 2005) in thuggishness, femininity, sexual appetite and criminality. However, in *The Boondocks'* second chapter on Gangstalicious, the open ending leaves a space for the exploration of black queer possibilities. Halberstam (2011) has noted that it is in this space of radical possibilities that revolt is animated. At the end of this episode, after Gangstalicious has been outed and ostracised, he meets with Riley who has been struggling with his

sexuality due to his adulation of this rapper. Riley asks Gangstalicious if he is indeed gay. Following a moment of hesitation, Gangstalicious denies his attraction to men. The personification of hip-hop within this show, Riley's self doubt about his sexuality redirects into his preoccupation with the sexuality of his favorite rapper. As Hill (2009) explains, the politics of sexual policing and outing in hip-hop is problematic as '[through] its outing practices, the hip-hop community is able to continuously ignore its own complex sexual ethic by keeping the focus on individual, anonymous, and, in the case of the homothug, aggregate queer bodies' (50). Instead of resolving the episode with a hetero/homonormative ending, Riley and Gangstalicious walk into the horizon, leaving the audience to their own conclusions. In this sense, this show encourages a re-imagination of queerness in its complex multiplicities revolting from within.

References

Alexander, M. (2010) *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*, New York: The New Press.

Carter, D. (2010) 'Blackness, animation, and the politics of black fatherhood in *The Cleveland Show', Journal of African American Studies*, 14(4), 499-508.

Cohen, K. F. (2004) *Forbidden animation: Censored cartoons and blacklisted animators in America*, North Carolina: McFarland.

Collins, P. H. (2000) *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, New York: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2004) *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*, New York: Routledge.

Connell, R. (2005) *Masculinities,* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Connell, R. & Messerschmidt, J. (2005) 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept', *Gender and Society,* 19(6), 829-859.

Crouse, E. (2006). 'We are family', *Film Comment*, 42, 42–46.

Davis, A. (1983) *Women, race and class,* New York: Random House.

Donaldson, S. (2001) 'A million jockers, punks, and queens', in D. Sabo, T. A. Kupers, and W. London (eds), *Prison masculinities,* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 118-126.

Fanon, F. (2008) *Black skin, white masks*, London: Pluto Press.

Fitzpatrick, L (2010) 'Top 10 controversial cartoons', *Time Magazine*, 26 April [Online]. Available at http://entertainment.time.com/2010/04/27/top-10-controversial-cartoons/slide/the-censored-eleven/. Access 20 July 2016.

Gross, L. (2001) *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America,* Chichester: Columbia University Press.

Hill, M. L. (2009) 'Scared straight: Hip-hop, outing, and the pedagogy of queerness', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(1), 29-54.

Halberstam, J. (1998) *Female masculinity,* Durham: Duke University Press

Halberstam, J. (2011) *Queer art of failure*, London: Duke University Press.

Halterman, J. (2014) '"Chozen" walks the line with gay white rapper at its core', *Logo News,* 20 January [Online]. Available athttp://www.newnownext.com/chozen-walks-the-line-with-gay-white-rapper-at-its-core/01/2014. Accessed 7 July 2016.

hooks, b. (1992) *Black looks: Race and representation,* Boston: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1994) *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*, New York; London: Routledge.

Jeffries, M. P. (2011) *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

King, C. R., Lugo-Lugo, C. R., & Bloodsworth-Lugo, M. K. (2010) *Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children* Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Levine, M. and Kimmel, M. (1998) *Gay macho: The life and death of the homosexual clone*, New York: New York University Press.

Manigault-Bryant, L. (2014) 'Pause, Auntie Momma! Reading religion in Tyler Perry's fat drag', in L. Manigault-Bryant, T. Lomax, and C. Duncan (eds), *Womanist and black feminist responses to Tyler Perry's productions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.165-187.

Mbembe, A. (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.

McBride, D. (2005) *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality*, New York: NYU Press.

McWhorter, J. (2009). 'Just a cartoon, but still: Is Family Guy in blackface funny?', *The New Republic*. 13 October [Online]. Available at http://www.tnr.com/blog/john-mcwhorter/family-guy-blackface-funny. Accessed 20 July 2016.

Mercer, K. (1994) *Welcome to the jungle: New positions in Black Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge.

Messerschmidt, J. (2001). 'Masculinities, crime and prison', in D. Sabo, T. A. Kupers, and W. London (eds), *Prison masculinities,* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 67-73.

Ngai, S. (2009) 'Animatedness', *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 89-126.

Russo, V. (1987) *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the*. New York: Harper and Row.

Streitmatter, R. (2009) *Perverts to fab five: the media's changing depiction of gay men and lesbians,* New York: Routledge.

Tardio, A. (2014) 'Method man blasts critics of "Chozen" TV show about gay white rapper', *HiphopDX.* 12 January [Online]. Available at http://hiphopdx.com/news/id.27010/title.method-man-blasts-critics-of-chozen-tv-show-about-gay-white-rapper. Accessed 20 July 2016.

Wells, P. (1998) *Understanding animation,* London: Routledge.

Irene Fubara-Manuel is a practice-based researcher and 3rd-year Doctoral student in Creative and Critical Practice at the University of Sussex. Her ongoing research incorporates animation in interrogating the biometric surveillance of black migrants. Her most recent projects include an installation *(Border Ritual*) and a video game (*Border Ritual 2.0*), which both present interventions of the process of crossing the UK Border as a black migrant.

Email: irenefubara@live.ca