

Reading Too Much Into It:  
Excessive Reading, Queer Possibility, and Representation That Matters

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2023

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## Abstract

This dissertation is a critical consideration of the phrases ‘representation matters’ and ‘reading too much into it’ and their consequences for the queer reading and interpretive practices of slash fanfiction in light of an influx of LGBT+ mainstream media storytelling over the last 20 years. I contend that, with the advent of more and more dynamic representation of LGBT+ characters and storylines in mainstream media, the expectations for what ‘representations’ of queerness may be said to ‘matter’ have likewise shifted, resulting in disciplinary action taken against those readers who still insist upon the presence of extracanonial queer potentials in a given media text. By considering the temporal codes through which LGBT+ characters come to matter in media narratives, I will evaluate the limitations of such storytelling and argue that extrapolative fanfiction is a means by which practitioners “[turn] to the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny of the homonormative,” which has expanded to include many depictions of LGBT+ experience on television and in film (Muñoz 2009). By focusing on characters and stories that are frequently taken up by queer fanfiction communities despite lack of intention or confirmation of canonical representation from the media producers, I want to explore the ways in which queer utopian possibilities defy material representation and resist the finitude of contemporary narrative structures. I argue that the queer possibilities of mainstream narrative media objects—even those that are produced in arguably the most normative and rigid production economies—coalesce around

characters and in stories that bear important formal and thematic similarities. I will examine queer pairings from several contemporary media narratives, including *Supernatural*, *Sherlock*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. By considering some of the most popular and prolific queer fanfiction pairings of the last few decades, I explicate these similarities and suggest queer excessivity and temporality as key determining factors in what futures are imaginable for which bodies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hello, committee! You will find herein an extremely chaotic gaggle of footnotes that range wildly in usefulness and relevance. While part of me is reticent at the prospect of leaving them as they are, I actually think they've been a happy accident in the theoretical framework of this project. I have occasionally struggled to balance the 'fan' and the 'academic' in the voice I employ in this dissertation, and have compromised by including much of my fannish commentary and fan-inflected theorizing in the footnotes. I now think that this multivocality is essential to the ideas that I'm developing here, and so have elected to leave the notes as they are for the moment. I hope that you enjoy the evidence of my irrepressible need to be a snarky, pedantic asshole. But also, that's kind of the fannish posture a lot of the time, huh?

## Dedication

For my grandparents, Lois and Leonard Studlien, who taught me to look to the horizon.

## Acknowledgments

It feels a bit surreal to finally write out what seems to have been an ever-growing list of people to whom I owe my gratitude for helping me to complete this project. I've always joked that my dog, Penny, would have to be the first name on that list, as she's basically been this dissertation's second author. She is even now asleep at my feet, as she has been for the writing of essentially every word contained in this document. She's patiently listened to me talk my thoughts out while driving, while walking, while pacing the floors of my house like a madwoman, and she's been a constant source of love and support the whole time. She's my true homie, and she absolutely deserves to be acknowledged for the labor that she's put into this project.

In the same vein, I would be remiss if I didn't thank the land on which I have lived while writing this dissertation, which has nourished and sustained me in profound and humbling ways. I wish to thank Glen Echo and Iuka ravines, Blendon Woods, and the woods at Rush Run in particular. I thank the Olentangy and the Scioto rivers as well as their tributaries, and send gratitude to those fighting to protect and heal Ohio's waters and woods. I live and work on the ancestral homelands of the Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, and Wyandotte people among many others who have and do call this land home. My education at The Ohio State University has been at the expense of these peoples' forced removal from this land, and I wish to honor the pain and displacement through which I have come to live in and learn from this good green place.

For as fascinated as I've always been with the Hero's Journey (as evidenced by my chapter on *Supernatural*), I don't know that I ever expected to get my own very literal Wise Mentor. And yet, from the second we met, Linda Mizejewski has been an inexpressibly important guide, collaborator, partner, and friend as I've navigated the complexities of this project and its completion. Her belief in my abilities has helped me to push myself and take risks in my writing, teaching, and scholarship, and I simply could not have completed this project without her steady and unwavering support. From requests for professional advice to socially-distanced chats on the patio to high tea at Fortnum & Mason, thank you for all of the opportunities that you've given me and for your guidance and friendship. Obi-Wan and Yoda are old news: Linda Mizejewski is my General Leia Organa.

I am also enormously grateful to Robyn Warhol, Guisela Latorre, and Jared Gardner for their support and guidance in this process. In classrooms, in office visits, and in our reliably delightful conference room kikis during the developmental milestones of this process, your incisive questions and thoughtful feedback have shaped this project and the work that I hope will yet come from it. I must also thank the students, faculty and staff of the Department of Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University for creating the dynamic feminist intellectual community in which this interdisciplinary project could be written. My respect for this kickass group of humans is immeasurable; thank you for the new and better worlds you imagine and bring into being through your work.

Tegan Tyler and Zev Mordechai Greenwood have been my dearest friends and chosen family for almost 15 years. I have a vivid memory of Tegan gleefully giving me

shit upon discovering me reading fanfiction instead of coursework one day in undergrad, and here we are one Ph.D. later. Make fanfiction the coursework you want to see in the world, I guess. Tegan has been an important collaborator in the theorizing of this project, as well. As my erstwhile fic writing partner, the work that I've done here would not have been possible without that other writing. In the same way, Zev and I got into it about the epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* one day years ago, and that time-honored argument has shaped and influenced my thinking about narrative time – and particularly ending – with every new iteration of it. They have been pushing me to reexamine my habituated ways of thinking since that day, and I could not have done this without them. One of the amazing bonuses of OSU has been the opportunity to reconnect and build an enduring friendship with Jackson Stotlar, whose support as both a friend and colleague has been deeply important both to this dissertation and to the sanity of the person writing it.

My gratitude to my family for all their support and love can't be expressed in words, but I will nevertheless give it a shot. My parents, Kurt and Kathy Jackson, have always been unwaveringly supportive of the admittedly sort of circuitous path that I've taken to reach this milestone. Thank you for the language, for the music, for the art and film and *books* – and thank you for believing in what I've always seen in them. To my siblings, Teague Jackson and Hadley Jackson: I'm so unbelievably proud of both of you and the work that you do, the risks that you take, the adventures you make. Thanks for being people with whom I am proud to share this world. Dr. Corbin Johnson, thank you for being my sounding board and my mirror in this facet of our lives as you have been in

many others since The Olive Incident. To the Jackson and Molloy families at large, thank you for your constant love and support.

I can hear them playing the Shut Up and Sit Down music, but I want to thank the people who made and continue to make the stories that I consider in this dissertation. Fan and producer alike, the work that you've done to create these characters and the worlds they inhabit *matters*, as I hope I've convincingly argued here. Thank you for doing it.

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Jackson, Maghan Molloy. (2016) "Cyborgs in Revolutionary Manhattan." *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking (Popular Culture and Philosophy)*. Eds. Aaron Rabinowitz and Robert Arp. New York: Open Court Publishing.

## Fields of Study

Major Field: Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Making Representation Matter

*“We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world,  
and ultimately new worlds.”*

– José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

#### Make The Yuletide Gay

In a November 2020 article in *The Guardian*, actress Kristen Stewart says that *Happiest Season* (Clea DuVall 2020) is “a gay Christmas movie,” which is “a huge exhale” for queer audiences, who have long been told not to hold their breath for nuanced representation in mainstream storytelling. She admits that, while the film is not the first to represent relationships between gay characters, “two girls in a Christmas movie . . . from a studio like Sony” marks a significant turning point for LGBT+<sup>2</sup> media representation (Nicholson 2020). Indeed, *Happiest Season* is only one example amidst an influx of mainstream American media narratives to centralize—or at least not exclude—the experiences of LGBT+ people from their productions.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will use the acronym LGBT+ as my standard reference in contradistinction to my understanding of queerness. While I recognize the more capacious versions of the acronym include “QIA” and more as an explicit gesture of inclusivity and belonging, queerness in my estimation cannot really exist in a state of belonging under conditions of straight time. I will therefore omit the ‘Q’ from my use of the acronym.

When The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) released the first *Where We Are on TV* report in 2005, they reported that LGBTQ characters “represent[ed] less than 2 percent of all characters on the broadcast networks.” Accounts of the 2019–2020 season report more than five times that, with 10.2 percent of characters identified as “gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer” (2006). GLAAD’s Studio Responsibility Index for 2020 reports that 18.6 percent of films by seven major American studios contained LGBTQ characters, a roughly 5 percent increase from the initial report in 2013 (2006). The steady growth of these statistics over the last decade accounts for a small portion of an increasingly complex media economy populated with streaming services and social media content creators vying with established media enterprises for audience attention.

With the subsequent inclusion of gay romantic leads even in the apotheotically conservative subgenre of *Hallmark* Christmas movies, this milestone of LGBT+ media representation that Stewart describes as “a huge exhale” may well mark something of a watershed: the presence of LGBT+ characters and storylines in much of the media landscape is no longer the exception but, increasingly, the expectation. Further, the preemptive goodwill generated for these projects by audiences and the popular press indicates that, for media producers and the entities who bankroll them, there are material advantages to a conspicuous investment in the axiom *representation matters*.

For scholars of queer media, this influx of LGBT+ representation in mainstream narratives offers an unprecedented opportunity to consider a comparatively vast sample size of queer characters and storylines. This cultural shift and its associated economic stakes may allow us to discern patterns in the narratives and characterizations of

mainstream LGBT+ media, rather than considering each text strictly on its own terms or in conversation with a small number of peers or historical antecedents. We may likewise take the opportunity to revisit the theoretical archive of queer reading and reception practices to consider their shifting uses, gratifications, and limitations in a mainstream media landscape where LGBT+ experience is no longer relegated solely to meta- and subtextual registers. How have queer audiences' interpretive practices been impacted by shifting popular expectations around LGBT+ media? What patterns emerge when we consider the expanding breadth of the LGBT+ film/television canon? And how might we newly encounter queer readings that yet persist in troubling, critiquing, or rejecting the primacy of affirmative canonical representation, or, indeed, the lack of it?

In considering these questions in this dissertation, I will attend to the practice of slash fanfiction, which I define as transformative fan writing that pairs two or more characters of the same gender romantically and/or sexually. While fanfiction broadly defined is a dynamic and malleable web of individual and community practices, norms, and aesthetics, I am particularly interested here in the extrapolative queer fanfiction that is the result of excessive reading. I consider why fans persist in queering characters and stories extracanonically in the face of an ostensibly diversifying media landscape, and engage critically with the accusations that these fans are *reading too much into* the media they interpret as queer. Encountering these questions through a critical engagement with José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer utopian temporality, I use slash fanfiction to consider the persistence of fan writing that extrapolates upon the recognition of queer feeling and possibility where none have been canonically affirmed.

## Reading Too Much Into It

In a 2016 survey I conducted of 290 fans of the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010–2017) who were active on Tumblr, 204 (71 percent) indicated that they had at some point been told that “[they] were *reading too much into* a piece of media that [they] interpreted as having queer text/subtext” (Jackson 2016). During conversations that followed, respondents elaborated by relating interactions with individuals both inside of their fannish communities and beyond who had met their apprehension of queer affect with skepticism and accused them of excessive reading. Alex Henderson at *The Afictionado* begins a 2019 blog post with an illustrative hypothetical that mirrors the experiences of many of my interlocutors:

[Y]ou’re watching a TV show with your pal and you spot what you see as the blossoming of a beautiful queer romance, but when you mention it to your friend they blink in surprise and say they hadn’t noticed that *at all*. “Are you sure?” they ask, sincerely but bemused. “They just seem like good friends to me.” Maybe they’ll suppress a sigh, maybe they’ll laugh it off. “Not everything has to be gay all the time. You’re overthinking it.”

*Damn, you think, suddenly unsure. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I am reading too much into this—maybe in my hunger for queer representation, for stories and relationships I could genuinely see myself reflected in, I’ve developed a habit of digging too deep and seeing things that aren’t there. Not everything has to be gay all the time, you think, even though you’d actually been headcanon-ing*

both characters as *bi*, though that feels like a technicality that will take too long to explain to your already-sceptical buddy” (Henderson 2019, emphasis mine).

A Tumblr search for the phrase “reading too much into it” yields a wealth of content wherein media fans actively critique their own and others’ interpretive practices. At the time of this inquiry, the most active of these were in relation to the finale of the long-running CW series *Supernatural* (2005–2020). As I will discuss at length in Chapter 2, the show has often been a target of criticism from fans and the popular press for engaging in queerbaiting around the perceived romantic/sexual tension between monster hunter Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel. In one of the final episodes of the show’s final season (Episode 15.18), and after eleven seasons of audience investment in the possibility of a canonical *Destiel* relationship, Castiel confesses his love in a tearful speech to Dean and is promptly sucked into non-existence. For some queer viewers, “it was the fastest ‘Bury your gays’ we’ve ever seen, while for others, “being able to just say out loud that dean and cas were in love without people being like *youre* [sic] *reading too much into the scenes*, you just want them to be together so youre seeing it that way, why do they have to be gay why can’t they just be friends / the honest relief of everything is actually astounding” (Tenbarga 2020, emphasis mine). The fluency with which this fan echoes the exact rhetorical moves articulated in Henderson’s post speaks to the prevalence of this accusation of *reading too much into it*.

Negotiating expectations of eventual canonicity around queer *ships*—the romantic-sexual pairing of two or more characters that a given fan supports—is a relatively new facet of fannish discourse “in a media world that has drastically changed since the days [when] we had to look for crumbs to find any sort of representation”

(Mason 2020). The dynamics of queer fannish reception practices within fandoms and in cultural conversations more broadly are likewise shifting. Alexander Doty's contention that "it behooves the film and television industries to allow queerness some sort of expression much of the time" relies on a relatively abstract understanding of queerness and its operations. It depends on structural and temporal apprehensions of queer affect that supersede the decisionist imperative of what Doty refers to as a "'show me the action/say the word' view of queer representation" (Doty 2000). Amy Villarejo echoes Doty in her critique of "the 'secret decoder ring' theory of media (whereby a message is hidden in a given text, and it wends its way nefariously toward an unwitting receiver; the astute cultural critic knows better, decodes the hidden message, and exposes the lurking evil" (Villarejo 2014).

However, as the expectations of what constitutes recognizable queerness in media become codified both by entities like GLAAD and within audience communities—hashtag campaigns like #GiveElsaAGirlfriend and #LexaDeservedBetter attest to fans' investment in canonical LGBT+ representation—the utility of more conceptual interpretive practices gains new valence.<sup>3</sup> Doty proclaims that "[q]ueer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or '*reading too much into things*' readings" but rather that "[t]hey result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (Doty 1993, emphasis mine). His contention has been echoed by scholars of queer

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<sup>3</sup> From Navar-Gill and Stanfill: "We [...] describe three key features of queer fan hashtag campaigns: how they harness affordances and industrial values, what they contend is wrong in industrial practice, and what they articulate as a better way." They, too, are a utopian intervention.; Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill. "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions." *Journal of Film and Video*, 70:3–4. 2018.

media and its reception who argue that queerness is not possible *only* where it is named as such, but rather infuses texts, characters, and entire formats in conversation with the audiences who seek and find it. Villarejo, Jack Halberstam, Lynne Joyrich, Bo Ruberg, Hollis Griffin, Quinlan Miller, and indeed Muñoz are among the media scholars who apprehend queerness affectually, locating it in the interrelations between texts, readers, and the larger structural matrices of television, film, video games, and other popular media. The apprehension of queerness in media depends, for these scholars and others, on more than the canonical utterance of an identitarian noun.

The extension of queer affectual recognition beyond the bounds of what we might term denotative or quantitative representation is well-documented in accounts of queer audience and reception practices. For scholars of fandom, indexical and networked interpretive practices that propagate in discrete fandoms or around individual characters bring to light the ways in which reading too much into things is an essential practice for individuals and communities invested in the queer potentials inherent in even the most assumptively heteronormative media environments. Scholars of secondary fan production have considered how these potentials are identified and expounded upon by fan artists of all stripes who read too much into the media texts in which they are invested.

The dynamics of excessive reading and its queer consequences are particularly prevalent in scholarship on fanfiction. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse define fanfiction as “the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds,” but acknowledge that this definition may become unwieldy for being so broad (Busse and Hellekson 2014). I attend particularly to slash fanfiction that pairs two or more characters of the same gender romantically and/or sexually. More particularly

still, I will focus on slash *proper*, wherein the characters in question are portrayed in their source texts as (assumptively) heterosexual, cisgender men. The modifying prefix *fem* is commonly affixed to fanfiction wherein the characters involved are women, and femslash has its own unique relationships to queerness, excessivity, and temporality that are tangential to my argument here, but which have been admirably considered elsewhere by Julie Levin-Russo, Rukmini Pande, Eve Ng, Alice Kelly and others.

Since the inception of fan studies as a discipline, scholars and fans alike have posited many explanations for slash fanfiction and have troubled the assumption that it is a form of fannish expression that belongs exclusively to women. Lamb and Veith posit that male/male slash presents a politically neutral power dynamic through which to imagine romance broadly conceived and Joanna Russ situates fanfiction as a means by which people may access erotic pleasure outside the strictures of hegemonic gender roles. In more recent interventions, Richard Berger argues that slash presents an opportunity for queer fans to explore their identities and desires, and Diana Koehm understands it as a vehicle through which women and queers rework hegemonic texts in their own image. The curious and polysemic nature of fanfiction and particularly of slash has been a favored bailiwick of scholars who often focus on the resistant and liberatory potentials with which slash fanfiction has been freighted since Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*. As fan studies has grown older and its genealogies more established, however, the transgressive nature of fanfiction has been productively complicated. Suzanne Scott traces a utopian tone to the maturing field of fan studies that is borne out in early scholarly work on fanfiction, though more recent work on slash fanfiction has looked askance at sweeping proclamations of the form's resistive potential. Many, including

Berit Åström and Kyra Hunting, have observed that slash fiction's outward transgressiveness—in that it refuses the primacy of heterocentrist interpretation—often gives way to storytelling that is normative and conventional, if not outright conservative.

In *Fake Geek Girls*, Scott calls for a reinvestment on the part of fan studies in a critical partnership with intersectional feminism while cautioning that we should stop short of any proclamation of fandom's intrinsic subversive potential. And indeed, a growing body of scholarly work points to significant and troubling elisions in fan studies' intellectual and sociopolitical purview, particularly where the subject of race in fandom is—or fails to be—considered. Rebecca Wanzo argues that “[o]ne of the reasons race may be neglected is because it troubles some of the claims—and desires—at the heart of fan studies scholars and their scholarship,” an incisive critique that has rightly caused a burgeoning tide of skepticism around claims of fandom's inherent inclusivity and progressiveness (Wanzo 2015).

While it is necessary and right that the study of fanfiction and its associated communities should become more complex and nuanced, I hesitate at the idea that we should renege on our investment in fanfiction's utopian potentials full-stop. Again, I do not consider *utopian* to be an unproblematic synonym for *subversive* or *resistant*. Rather, I wish to consider utopia as a discrete phenomenon unto itself—one that speaks to the complex interrelations between text, reader, and the temporal and experiential excessivity of queerness. In keeping with Sara Gwenllian Jones, Catherine Tosenberger, and others who do not encounter queer fanfiction “as a rebellion *against* the text, a scavenging for textual crumbs,” I want to advocate for *reading too much into it* as a means by which we

may consider the workings of queer utopia in the affectual interplay among media fans, queer temporalities, and mainstream media texts (Jones 2002).

### Muñoz, Fan Studies, and Disidentificatory Futures

In the introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that “[s]ome will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.” The first time that I read that sentence was the genesis of this dissertation. My own participation in media fandom has largely been through reading and writing fanfiction, and my interest in the possibilities of the form have often superseded my attachments to any fandoms, relationships, or characters. As a result, my reading has been broad, and this observation struck me as notably prescient for the creative ethic that I have observed among fanfiction communities—particularly those which coalesce around queer relationships that occasion queer extrapolation on the source text. Not all queer fanfiction communities insist upon the existence of primary textual evidence in support of their ships, but for those that do, I argue that the texts in question hew remarkably closely to the tenets of queer temporality and excessivity as Muñoz describes them in *Cruising Utopia*.

Muñoz’s name is not unfamiliar in the context of fan studies. His theory of disidentification has been generative for scholars concerned with the reception practices of marginalized communities and subjects. Figured in his first book as a means by which

queers of color encounter, attach to, and resist media texts, disidentification has since been taken up as a means by which any minority subject may “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 1999). It has been attributed by fan scholars as a practice to which *all* queers are habituated, especially in discussions of queer reception practices in fandom. This propensity in fan studies to elide the centrality of the “of color” in Muñoz’s “queers of color” in favor of a broader, more soluble understanding of disidentification is undoubtedly a mark of what Wanzo describes as the way in which “race is still frequently treated as an add-on or as something that should be addressed somewhere later” (Wanzo 2015). My intention is not to retreat to this platitude, though disidentification is not my focus in this project. I will merely note that the “[failure] to treat whiteness as a racialized identity” in studies of disidentification speaks to the validity of the utopian-skeptical turn in recent fandom scholarship (Wanzo 2015).

The concept of disidentification attends to the contradictions of encountering and having affective attachment to media texts whose vision of marginalized identities is limited, harmful, inaccurate, or absent altogether. It is a process by which queers, people of color, women, and other structurally marginalized folks may occupy subjectivities other than the binary configuration of the “‘Good Subject,’ who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture” versus the “‘Bad Subject,’ who imagines herself outside of ideology” altogether (Muñoz 1999). Recognizing the pleasures and potentials of media spectatorship as well as its inherent political tensions for those whose identities preclude their unproblematic identification with mainstream texts, Muñoz offers

disidentification as a means by which the “‘disidentifacatory subject’ . . . simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form (Muñoz 1999). Disidentification, understood thus as a means of encounter between reader and text, has been taken up by fan scholars who consider the reading practices of people whose bodies, experiences, and desires are unlikely to be represented with any nuance in mainstream cultural narratives.

For Muñoz, it is through fiction that the self for whom identification of any stripe might matter comes into being. The self who comes into being through fiction “is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction,” and this process is disidentification (Muñoz 1999). Fans who write slash fiction take this process one step further, as Alexis Lothian has explained, “making sexual and emotional fantasies narratively real” through their interpretive practice (Lothian 2007). And indeed, the project of gaining facility with disidentification and its narrative manifestation is a practice. It requires work. In fact, “in order to access queer visibility, we may need to *squint*, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here-and-now” (Muñoz 199, emphasis mine). We may need to pay closer attention. We may need to read *too much*.

The accusation of *reading too much into it* is a dismissive objection that is raised within fannish contexts as a means of “restrict[ing] and pathologiz[ing] specific cultural groups, while promoting the achieved ‘normality’ and ‘legitimate’ authority of others” (Hills 2002). It belies an epistemological investment in representable desire that dismisses any queer potential that cannot be assimilated into what Muñoz calls “straight time.” In straight time, an “autonaturalizing temporality” tells us that “there is no future but the here-and-now of our everyday life.” The possibility of “queerness as something

that is not yet here” is not only impossible, it is, more significantly, unimaginable (Muñoz 2009). To imagine beyond the ontological logics of the present moment is to be in excess of reality, and anything in excess of reality does not and cannot exist. And yet fanfiction, that excessive imaginary world that is *definitionally* reliant on the cultural production of the present, persists as a phenomenon that points to queerness that is not yet here but always potentially occurring in the future. When fans like Henderson’s hypothetical shipper or Tumblr users who read *Sherlock* and *Supernatural* as replete with incipient queer potential are accused by others of *reading too much into* the text(s) of their fandom, they are accessing a queer visuality and glimpsing a utopian horizon that may necessitate some squinting.

The excessive reading performed by fans who support queer textual relationships and write their disidentificatory desires into narrative being requires that they become habituated to an interpretive practice that is not entirely predicated upon the “show me the action/say the word” view of media representation. Of course, many practitioners of excessive reading and writers of extrapolative fanfiction live in hope that their ship might one day achieve canonical status, as evidenced by the relief that one Destiel shipper describes as “actually astounding.” And yet fans’ practice of *reading too much into* media texts in search of queer potential is not stymied by the failure of those texts to explicitly acknowledge the presence of queer affect in the here-and-now of the storyworld, nor to utter any identitarian nouns—lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, etc.—in reference to the characters they ship. Used as a noun when referring to the pairing one supports, the verb “to ship” refers to the active nature of this support on the part of invested fans. It might well be said that to ship a ship is a performance that “is not simply a *being* but a *doing* for

and toward the future” (Muñoz 2009, emphasis mine). And if queerness is always horizontal, then the looking-forward of fans who ship queer ships belies an investment in the ongoing imminence of Muñozian queer utopia. It is through the anticipatory excessive reading performed through shipping that queer fans begin to dream new worlds. *Reading too much into it* is the genesis of queer utopian imaginings.

While I have in this project discussed *reading too much* as primarily the purview of queer and female fans, I want to suggest here that *excessive reading* is a strategy that might be practiced by any community of fans who are sufficiently invested in their shared interpretive priorities to establish collaborative norms of collective intelligence. I have used two different terms for this strategy somewhat interchangeably throughout this project: namely, excessive reading and reading too much. While I do use these two phrases thus throughout, I would like to add nuance to the distinction between reading that is merely excessive and reading that is necessarily *too much*.

If all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares, then all *reading too much* is excessive but not every excessive reading is inherently too much. Rather, it is the fans’ collective orientation to the story and its possibilities, along with their shared investment in the normative structures of both narrative and cultural hegemony, that creates the possibility of excessive reading that still manages to fit unproblematically within established modes of fannish attention and behavior – at least up to a point. Indeed, all three of my case studies provide unique opportunities to consider the risks inherent in excessive reading when it is temporally oriented toward the protection and expansion of existing oppressive systems rather than a forward-dawning liberation from them. Or, put another way: toward the known and therefore governable quantity of the

past rather than the inevitably unquantifiable and unpredictable otherwise of the queer utopian future. For the purposes of clarity, I will distinguish between the different modes of excessive reading that I consider specifically in contradistinction to the theory of queer excessive reading that I have developed as *reading too much*.

### Thinking ‘Straight’

It strikes me as interesting that Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia* by addressing the difficulty of “argu[ing] for hope or critical utopianism” in an intellectual landscape permeated by antiutopian analysis. He traces the emergence of an “antirelational approach” to queer theory that “replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity,” a phrasing that strikes me as intriguingly similar to genealogical accounts of fan studies’ development (Muñoz 2009). Over time, fan studies has moved from the so-called “Fandom is Beautiful” phase to more contemporary interventions that have “broadened the scope of enquiry to include less marginalized fannish objects . . . and discussions of the psychological relationship between individual fans and their fan objects” (Coppa 2014). While critical complications of fan studies’ attachment to the utopian functioning of media fandoms writ large have added welcome and necessary nuance, the wholesale dismissal of fandom’s utopian potentials to “charges of naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor” risk ignoring or eliding the very real ways in which queer utopian feeling frames and informs the reading practices of queer media fans (2009). While I share Muñoz’s disinterest in “a notion of the radical that merely connotes some notion of extremity, righteousness, or affirmation of newness,” I want to make use

of this historical moment wherein changing attitudes around LGBT+ representation give us an opportunity to explore the resistive potential of excessive reading to “a politics of the here-and-now that is underlined by . . . [a] pragmatic gay agenda” of representation that matters only when it is explicit, empirical, canonical (2009). I want to read too much into the idea of reading too much into it.

To that end, I read *Cruising Utopia* throughout this project in much the same way and using similar methodologies to those I attribute to transformative media fans and to fanfiction practitioners in particular. As Matt Hills has observed, “studying academic-fans studying fans (or themselves as fans!) can, all too often, reveal the ways in which an academic imagined subjectivity triumphs over a fan imagined subjectivity” (Hills 2002). I am, to be sure, involved in precisely this kind of navel-gazey enterprise within this dissertation: not only am I a fan of all of the primary media texts with which I engage here, but I am also a fan of the book *Cruising Utopia* by José Esteban Muñoz. Reading it for the first time was, for me, a crash course in excessive reading as a scholarly and theoretical enterprise as much as one driven by the queerer and more unruly emotionality that has often been excluded from the imagined subjectivity of the academic. The book put expressible language to concepts that I had been struggling to express, and each new page brought moments of affective recognition that signal the possibility of queer utopia. In much the same way that fanfiction authors will lift dialogue directly from a primary text and embed it in their own extrapolative worlds, my frequent quoting of *Cruising Utopia* is intended not as a mere parroting of Muñoz. Rather, I hope that my theorizing will stand on its own in such a way that my direct references to Muñoz’s text will elicit precisely the same kind of affective recognition and horizontal possibility that arises when

fic authors quote original dialogue. While Henry Jenkins' early work refers to this propensity of fannish practice as poaching, I intend to demonstrate that there is for my purposes no meaningful distinction between the citational practices of academic writing and the original use of quoted material through which fans theorize and practice excessive reading. For those readers who, like me, are fans of Muñoz's writing, my hope is that these echoes and rhymes will work for you as I have intended and thereby justify their own inclusion. In fact, as much as I have written academically about *Sherlock*, *Supernatural*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe in this dissertation, I have also written *Cruising Utopia* fanfiction.

My primary heuristic here is particularly fanfiction that pairs two or more characters of the same gender romantically and/or sexually. Often called slash fiction, this practice has long been a favored topic for fan scholars who have evinced countless possible explanations for why media fans read and write what Henry Jenkins once referred to as "this curious fiction" (Jenkins 1992). Fanfiction occupies a particular place in the cultural imaginary of fannish activities, and those who practice it have likewise been marked by their affinity. Fanfiction is a practice that has long been attributed almost exclusively to women and girls, and the "gendering of fannish activities continues to affect inter- and intra-fannish policing" (Busse 2013). I argue that the deployment of the phrase reading too much into it against readers and writers of extracanonically queer fanfiction is an example of this normative policing and that this disciplinary tactic has larger implications for how we can consider the possibilities and limitations of canonical queer representation more broadly. With more canonically-recognized LGBT+ characters with whom to form affinities, why do some media fans still insist on extrapolating upon

the queer potentials they recognize in characters and narratives where no identitarian nouns have been spoken, no ‘exclusively gay’ actions undertaken?<sup>4</sup> Why do fans continue to ‘read too much into’ the texts of their fandom in search of queer potentials and desires that are much more easily found elsewhere, in other texts? What is missing from those other texts that may be found where queer potentials are *not* indexically recognized? And why do these perceived potentials seem to coalesce more easily around some characters and narratives than around others? Why is excessive reading such an enduring strategy of queer interpretive practice?

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Muñoz evinces his figuration of queer utopia as a means by which “we must enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz 2009). This imperative works as a succinct definition for my understanding of extrapolative fanfiction and its importance as a means of both expanding upon and resisting the narrative possibilities available to queer readers of media texts, especially now that there are significant material benefits to producers’ conspicuous investment in canonical LGBT+ representation that ‘matters.’<sup>5</sup> Muñoz’s concept of queer utopian temporality attends to the tensions inherent in purporting to represent the queer by insisting upon

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<sup>4</sup> In a 2017 interview with *Attitude* magazine in advance of the premiere of Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, director Bill Condon revealed that the film would include the first “exclusively gay moment in a Disney movie.” This supposedly landmark moment has been widely mocked in the intervening years and has become an oft-cited talking point for the limitations of enumerative LGBT+ representation as a metric of sociopolitical progress.

<sup>5</sup> Among the many examples of media producers capitalizing on the sociopolitical proclamation that representation matters have been a glut of new collections on streaming services that purport to highlight the work of diverse filmmakers, including Netflix’s succinctly-named Representation Matters Collection. Another might be an ill-fated attempt by Barnes & Noble Booksellers to rebrand classic works of Western literature with ‘diverse’ depictions of otherwise-unchanged characters. The depiction of Frankenstein’s Monster as a hulking Black man is particularly ‘yikes.’

queerness as “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.” Queerness in this paradigm is “not yet here.” Rather than relying upon an idea of ‘progress’ that ultimately culminates at some teleological endpoint, queerness stems out in all directions from the “bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment,” providing glimpses of multivarious thens and theres from within the temporal structures and strictures of the here and now (Muñoz 2009). To contemplate queerness is to submit to a kind of ontological humility in which “we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world,” but rather encounter it as an eventuality that is always coming but will never fully arrive (Muñoz 2009). Understood thus, the idea of representing the queer becomes unworkable, as to represent something is to fix it in time, to define it, to delimit its scope to the here and now and to restrict the possibilities of what we can *be* to what we can *see*. If queerness by its nature defies fixity, then claiming the possibility of queer representation in media or in any other cultural site presents some seemingly insurmountable contradictions.

Queer utopian temporality necessitates an investment in this always-coming-but-never-arriving future that defies the supremacy of a single narrative truth and makes room for seemingly boundless permutations that do not purport to definitively end. The narrative structure to which we are culturally habituated—the exposition-climax-conclusion trajectory of the popular cause-and-effect narrative—is ill-equipped to encompass the possibilities of such multiplicity. Even recent films and shows that demonstrate conspicuous investment in LGBT+ characters and experiences inevitably collapse these multiple queer futures into a single legible conclusion, an “auto-naturalizing temporality” that Muñoz calls ‘straight time.’ In order for representation to

matter, as the oft-used axiom suggests, it must be observable in the here and now. It must be material. And thus, it must foreclose all but one narrative possibility with which to conclude the story, a linear-progressive teleology in which the “ecstatic and horizontal temporality” of queerness is functionally illegible (Muñoz 2009).

Consider *Glee* (Fox 2009-15), certainly among the preeminent loci of LGBT representation on network television to date. Featuring characters designed to represent each of the letters in the ‘LGBTQ’ acronym, *Glee* nevertheless concludes with the double-wedding of “modern gay teen” Kurt to high school sweetheart Blaine and of lesbian cheerleader Santana to pansexual best friend Brittany. Other ‘progressive’ depictions of LGBT subjects in popular media on *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC 2005-present), *Pretty Little Liars* (Freeform 2010-2017), *Schitt’s Creek* (CBC 2015-2020) and in romantic comedies *Alex Strangelove* (Craig Johnson 2017) and *The Prom* (Ryan Murphy 2020) among others end similarly, with queer characters’ storylines being centrally concerned with integration into neoliberal subjecthood through access to the naturalizing power of culturally-legitimated monogamy, if not always “the flawed and toxic ideological formation known as marriage” (Muñoz 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Rather than the ‘endgames’ or ‘happily ever afters’ or series finales of straight time, queer narrative possibilities morph and multiply and reproduce in reaction to and in conversation with various stimuli of textual, subtextual, and contextual varieties.

Fanfiction and the communities that produce it reify this imperative. I am particularly

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<sup>6</sup> This is to say nothing of the propensity for media consumers to contract virulent cases of ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’ (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The 100*, *Chicago Fire*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Orange is the New Black* among so many others) or to feel it necessary to ‘bury the gays’ for pathos or shock value. This is another kind of collapse into a single narrative, to be sure, but one that does not really hold space for the characters’ futures to matter. Quite the opposite.

interested in examining extrapolative fanfiction, which I define as fan writing that engages closely with an original media text and extrapolates on queer potentials that are ostensibly present in the original text itself. Much queer fanfiction does not necessarily fit this definition. Fanfiction is a form of textual play, and as such is not necessarily beholden to the original text in any codified or particular way. For example, Alternate Universe or AU fanfiction removes the characters from their original narrative contexts only to drop them down in entirely different circumstances: as vampires, or knights, or simply as ‘normal’ high school students, baristas, and florists.<sup>7</sup> Crossover fiction creates wormholes between different narrative realities, where the Winchesters of *Supernatural* may team up with Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson or the Avengers suddenly find themselves at Hogwarts. Even within a single canon’s purview, relationships between characters who rarely or never meet in the source text are not uncommon. However, these are more easily recognizable as *play* and therefore do not invite the disciplinary accusation of ‘reading too much’ that is frequently leveled at fans and fan works that insist upon queerness already emergent in the characters as they exist in the canonical storyworld, by virtue of their actions and relationships as represented in the source text. When I term such works as extrapolative, it is in a nod to Alexander Doty’s exhortation that we drop the verb ‘to queer’ and its implication of “taking a thing that is straight and doing something with it” (Doty 2000). Rather, I suggest that extrapolative reading picks up on glimpses of queer utopian possibility that are already present in the source text and

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<sup>7</sup> Muñoz invokes Barthes in his consideration of the quotidian as particularly fertile ground for the apprehension of queer utopia. I will elaborate more on this facet of the argument and how I see it relating to Alternate Universe fanfiction more fully as appropriate within my discussions of my individual case studies.

uses them as a means of “stepping out of the linearity of straight time” that disciplines mainstream narrative texts into a linear-progressive, outcome-oriented experience of the future (Muñoz 2009). I will return to Doty to further delineate my project in a moment.

The figuration of queer utopian temporality as applied to extrapolative fanfiction lends important insight into the uses and gratifications of such writing for media fans who are invested in queer narratives, as well as the limitations of representation as an unproblematic metric of sociocultural liberation for LGBT+ communities. I evince excessive extrapolative reading as a practice through which fans resist the wholesale interpolation of their queer identities, affinities, and pleasures into the straight time that undergirds the normative logics of mainstream narrative media—and indeed, that animates all temporalities under heteronormative and white supremacist capitalism—even where ostensibly queer characters and storylines are included. By considering the temporal codes through which LGBT+ characters come to matter in media narratives, I will evaluate the limitations of such storytelling and argue that extrapolative fanfiction is a means by which practitioners “[turn] to the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny of the homonormative,” which has expanded to include many depictions of LGBT+ experience on television and in film (Muñoz 2009). The accusation of excessive reading with which this resistance is frequently met, both in inter-fan instances and in larger cultural narratives, situates such writing as “a maniacal and oddball endeavor” and signals its investment in the always-coming but not-yet-here eventuality of the queer utopian future (Muñoz 2009). The queer utopian impulse present in extrapolative fanfiction is a means by which readers invested in queer feelings and possibilities that defy representation may resist “the tyranny of the now” that permeates

the mainstream narrative field (Muñoz 2009). It is a way of asserting imagined possibilities that cannot be made material, and cannot therefore be said to matter under narrative logics that privilege the here and now of representable time.

Fanfiction's utility as a resistant practice is not unproblematic. Indeed, the scholarly conversation around transformative fan production has quite rightly moved beyond wholesale proclamations of slash fiction's subversive potential. Early academic interventions are enamored of the tensions inherent in such fiction as a practice undertaken primarily "by women, for women, with love" that nevertheless deals largely with romantic and sexual relationships between male characters, in a seeming inversion of patriarchal power structures wherein women are the objects of men's sexual attention and agency (Russ 1986). In the intervening years, this narrative has been complicated by countless scholars and the optimistic view of participatory fandom as intrinsically progressive has been subject to necessary nuance. In particular, the dynamics of race within fannish spaces and in the archive of scholarly literature on fan studies have been under scrutiny in contemporary conversations. As Angela Fazekas observes, "[the] hegemonic nature of whiteness as the invisible norm makes ostensibly neutral spaces, such as fandom, synonymous with white spaces" (2014). To lionize fanfiction as an intrinsically resistant, radical, or liberatory practice would indeed be shortsighted and would add nothing of value to a conversation about the uses and gratifications of transformative fan production.

However, I do want to consider the role that utopian imagination nevertheless continues to play for fans who engage in excessive and extrapolative queer reading. Although 'utopian' is often colloquially deployed as a synonym for 'subversive' or

‘progressive,’ I do not consider it to be so. The figuration of queer utopia that I will elaborate upon in this dissertation is a very particular and specific theoretical framework and, I contend, an important lens through which we may learn more about both the possibilities and limitations of extrapolative reading for any kind of liberatory imagination. Indeed, this understanding of utopia does not rely on the temporality of progress and takes a dim view of the “gay pragmatic organizing” that seeks expansion of the normative hallmarks of citizenship as the only means of queer legibility.<sup>8</sup> My intention here is not to declare the objects of my consideration to be ‘utopian’ as though that proclamation were in itself sufficient, but rather to explore the workings of the queer utopian impulse as we can see it operationalized through extrapolative fanfiction and through the fannish practice of *reading too much into* the texts on which they so extrapolate. By paying attention to how futurity, excessivity, and queerness in the Muñozian paradigm attach to certain characters and/or narratives more easily than to others, I want to take note of the ways in which fans’ deployment of queer utopian imagination through excessive reading creates real possibilities for narrative mattering that do not rely upon wholesale interpolation into the representative norms of ‘straight time.’ By the same token, I want to explore the limitations of utopian interpretive strategies that are still inextricably bound up in the narrative logics of mainstream media and which cannot avoid internalizing beliefs about bodies, excessivity, and futurity that animate so much sociocultural storytelling in a white supremacist and heteropatriarchal

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<sup>8</sup> I would certainly position the emergent sociopolitical truism that #RepresentationMatters as among the best examples of this gay pragmatic organizing. Although there has been significant work from queer scholars critiquing marriage, child-rearing, and military service as symptoms of homonormative homonationalism, I argue that the recent influx in LGBT+ media representation gives us unprecedented opportunity to consider media representation as a normative mechanism on its own terms.

political order. For all that the extrapolative fanfiction I will consider here does present very real utopian potentials in some important ways, it is nevertheless still a byproduct of a media environment wherein there are significant and unavoidable discrepancies in which representations of what bodies may be said to matter.

While I am demonstrably suspicious of mainstream media narratives that claim to explicitly represent queerness and to make it somehow material in contravention of the term's endemic indeterminacy, I do not believe that popular culture narratives are entirely devoid of queer possibility or potential. Muñoz contends that queer utopia is most easily glimpsed at "the fringe of political and cultural production," and his examples tend toward live performances that occur primarily within urban spaces and underground venues already populated by spectators who are habituated to apprehending queerness in such avant-garde and conceptual work as may be found there. While Muñoz and his interlocutors, including Samuel R. Delaney, Kevin Aviance, Ray Johnson, and others convincingly elaborate on the queer utopian potentials that may be glimpsed in these rarified spaces, I take umbrage with the idea that widely-accessible forms of entertainment like popular film and television are devoid of queer utopian possibility full stop. By critically engaging with the secondary fan writing that 'reads too much into' its primary text, we can discern the utopian potential of "bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment" of a given mainstream media narrative while still remaining in "an ontologically humble state" and resistant to "the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology [...] brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture" (Muñoz 2009). I do not truck with the idea that queer utopia may most easily be apprehended in tiny clubs and galleries attended by urbane

urbanites to the exclusion of those who will never set foot in such a place.<sup>9</sup> By paying attention to how queer utopian potentials are glimpsed even within the most mainstream and seemingly normative media spaces, I want to interrogate the idea of what queer utopian possibility is, where it may be glimpsed, and who may apprehend it.

### Avatars of Queer Futurity

To that end, the media objects under consideration in the chapters to follow have some significant things in common. While I will attend in some places to the secondary fan production around each media property in order to develop my arguments around the utopian impulse in excessive reading, it would be impossible to understand this production with any kind of clarity without also attending to the original texts.

Particularly because my focus here is on fanfiction that ‘reads too much’ into the original text, I find it necessary to consider both primary and secondary texts with a similar level of attention. The three texts that I consider here have structural, contextual, and temporal commonalities that invite queer possibility through the imperative of reading too much.

In particular, *Sherlock*, *Supernatural*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe all feature characters around whom queer possibility seems to coalesce. These characters, for whom I will use the general term Avatar of Queer Futurity (AQF), form the basis for my analysis. I submit that these characters are particularly well-suited for the apprehension of

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<sup>9</sup> Hollis Griffin ably discusses the ways in which queer possibility has been narrated as existing most robustly in urban spaces to the exclusion of small towns and rural areas. I am likewise interested in the ways in which the genealogical narrative of queer theory has excluded those queers who cannot or do not ever live in cities where their experiences and identities matter enough to discuss them in theorizations of queerness and its operations.

queer potentials due to their circumstantial excessivity, diegetic homosociality, and ailinear relationships to linear-progressive – straight – time. I will attend to each of these traits in more detail through their application to the specific characters that I will consider in my three case studies.

This project has arisen from my apprehension of an historical fulcrum-point wherein enculturated expectations about the possibilities of queer representation in mainstream narrative media are significantly shifting. By following the disciplinary admonition of reading too much into it into conversation with queer extrapolative fan production, I read too much into the possibilities and limitations occasioned by the tenets of excessive reading put into practice. I do not pretend that fanfiction itself is necessarily the culturally-denigrated object that it appeared for early fan scholars several decades ago; like so many other aspects of fannish participation, fanfiction has in some ways been drawn into ever-closer association with the monolith of mainstream cultural production that Suzanne Scott names “the convergence culture industry” (2019). However, as certain kinds of representation for LGBT+ characters and storylines have come to matter in the last 20 years, the stakes of queer interpretive practices applied to mainstream media narratives have likewise shifted. Alexander Doty argues in *Flaming Classics* that “it is [...] politically important, if queer readings are to stand up as legitimate readings in their own right, to articulate how other people might understand things *without reference to* these dominant cultural readings” (2000, emphasis original). As the field of dominant cultural readings has expanded to encompass at least some versions of ostensibly queer experience, however, we have a significant opportunity to take note of the differences between the normatively sanctioned LGBT+ narratives that have come to matter in

mainstream media storytelling and those interpretations of such texts that yet occasion the disciplinary accusation of *reading too much*. It is necessary to consider these acceptable dominant readings in order to discern where and how culturally acceptable visions of the LGBT+ give way to the queer, the unacceptable, the impossible, too much.

As the question of responsible media representation for marginalized communities has become an increasingly political one in recent years—the oft-cited axiom that #RepresentationMatters is frequently deployed metonymically to this effect—it has likewise become imperative to take the opportunity to look beyond the seemingly self-evident truth of this phrase to discern the ways in which the representations that matter nevertheless work to exclude ways of being and feeling that are incommensurate with the representational logics of straight time. By considering the shifting valences of *reading too much into it* and proposing extrapolative fanfiction as a mode of media interpretation that is resistant (but not immune) to such homonormative codes, I consider the rhetorical and temporal logics of *mattering* in the here and now and challenge the notion that the influx of LGBT+ representation that matters in popular narrative media is a self-evident sign of sociopolitical progress. Indeed, if I do my job right, I will problematize the aspiration of progress entirely.

While I cannot and would not suggest that the opportunity to see one's identities and experiences reflected in narrative media is unimportant, or that such representation does not matter (as far as *mattering* goes), I am suspicious of the ways in which stories about queer desire have been interpolated into and codified by the representational logics of heteronormative capitalism. Rather than breaking open narrative possibilities, challenging normative models of kinship and desiring, and imagining futures that do

something more or different than simply reiterate the sociopolitical circumstances of the present, the representations of LGBT+ experience that have come to matter in the contemporary popular media landscape do little more than shrink queer possibility to fit within the vision of the future that is always already present. This generally enumerative approach to accounting for ‘diversity’ in media representation is exemplified by the (now quite unironic) Bechdel Test and its progeny including the Vito Russo Test (LGBT+), DuVernay Test (BIPOC), and Tyrion Lannister Test (disability), all of which seek to codify the ways in which popular storytelling presents diverse characters and storylines *progressively* and in ways that *matter*. These metrics generally do not concern themselves with the end goal of the progress for which they advocate past the inclusion of marginalized people and identities in the representational logics of the material present. They do not necessarily hold space for the ways of being and knowing and feeling that cannot matter by the narrative, normative, and temporal means that have come to be legible as such. They do not ask why *mattering* matters.

By considering the phrases *representation matters* and *reading too much into it* where they converge in the practice of extrapolative queer fanfiction, I want to break open the idea of representative mattering as the last word in how individuals interact with and find queer meaning in the media that does – and does not – purport to represent them. By focusing on characters and stories that are frequently taken up by queer fanfiction communities despite no intention or confirmation of canonical representation from the media producers – and sometimes in active defiance of their views. I want to explore the ways in which queer utopian possibilities defy material representation and resist the finitude of contemporary narrative structures while still having real impact on the creative

economies in which they are implicated. I suggest that the queer possibilities of mainstream narrative media objects—even those that are produced in arguably the most normative and rigid production economies—coalesce around characters and in stories that bear important formal and thematic similarities.

Central to all of my chosen texts is a serialized narrative structure wherein there are periods of suspension of narrative progression. It is in these periods wherein extrapolation and the utopian imagination borne of excessive reading are most in evidence. *Supernatural* is a product of the American cable television industry, with season-long narratives of between 10 and 23 episodes aired weekly at a set time on a given cable network – The CW in the case of *Supernatural*. The preternaturally long-lived production was reliant on an advertising-based media economy that necessarily informed its episodic structure, as well as the fallow periods of hiatus between seasons when no new content was immediately forthcoming. *Sherlock* is a product of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a state-funded transmedia enterprise wherein typically fewer episodes are produced of a given project in comparison to the privatized and advertising-based economy of American cable television. There are four three-episode ‘series’ of *Sherlock* to-date, in addition to a Christmas special, as is common with popular BBC properties.<sup>10</sup> The hiatus periods in the production of *Sherlock* were protracted, with the gap between series 3 and 4 close to four years long.

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<sup>10</sup> The temporality of the state-funded ‘Christmas special’ and its consequences for sociopolitical mattering in a country that also (unlike the United States) has Christianity as its official religion are particularly fascinating, if not directly relevant to the argument I will make here.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is at first glance the outlier of my archive as it is the only one of my objects that cannot be classified as televisual rather than filmic, even under the most permissive definitions of each increasingly-unstable term. And yet the temporal implications of the MCU cannot be relegated strictly to the category of ‘film,’ either, as it is perhaps the largest and most successful example of interconnected transmedia storytelling to ever exist. Like the comic books from which so much of its narrative thrust is adapted, the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s entire structure is predicated upon serialization, and on the spaces that open up in periods of hiatus for extrapolation, imagination, and excessive reading by fans who may indulge in countless different possible narrative futures in the absence of a canonically-sanctioned conclusion. My analysis here will consider only a limited portion of the MCU’s ongoing transmedia experiment, as what is now called *The Infinity Saga* began with *Iron Man* in 2008 and concluded with the epic two-part finale of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). This first full arc of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a complete intertext in and of itself, and one that arose from the industrialization of sustained fannish attention that characterized the early digital convergence. It therefore more than qualifies for inclusion in this archive and, as in fact, provides an almost perfect case study for the powerful link between temporality and queerness with which to conclude my final chapter.

The media properties that I consider here are all serialized narratives, they were all produced under the auspices of powerful production economies for an assumptively broad audience, and none specifically purport to represent the characters in question as harboring any kind of queer desire, for each other or otherwise. The characters are

similarly congruent, in ways that will be central to my argument about the limitations of queer utopian imagination and its relationship to normative straight time.

I suggest that, in order for a character to work most convincingly as an avatar of queer utopian futures, three things must be true. First, the character must be in some way in excess of ‘normality,’ be it physically, intellectually, emotionally, or otherwise. The characters whom I will consider are excessive in all of these ways, frequently at the same time. If it is true that the queer utopian impulse may most easily “be glimpsed as something that is extra to the everyday,” then the most convincing avatars of that impulse would be circumstantially extra, too. In order for them to be read as *too much*, or for *reading too much* to work upon them in the service of queer possibility, they must be in some way *too much* for the circumstances of their narrative situation.

Second, the narrative should bring them in close proximity to at least one other character of the same gender who is likewise in excess of perceived normality, although how this excessivity manifests can vary significantly.<sup>11</sup> The characters’ relationship should be material to the progression of the narrative, and it is usually through their actions that the momentum of the narrative accelerates. That is to say, the characters must matter to the legible, representable story, and cannot therefore be extricated entirely from the logics of mainstream narrative time. This tenet may seem obvious, and yet bears stating explicitly in part because it is in this quarter where I most significantly differ from Muñoz’s theorization of queer utopia and how it may be apprehended. Muñoz’s objects

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<sup>11</sup> John Watson outlives his own death before the beginning of the primary narrative in *Sherlock*, as do Tony Stark (who is frequently shipped with Steve Rogers) in *Iron Man* (2008) and Bucky Barnes in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). These characters all have varying relationships to circumstantial excessivity, but they, too, have unruly relationships to straight time.

in *Cruising Utopia* are almost invariably live performances, and by their nature ephemeral. If not, then they are art objects that exist in the rarefied and specialized contexts of galleries and exhibition spaces, and the interactions that one might have with them are regulated by their circumstances.

This last is also true of the popular media artifacts I consider, although in perhaps the opposite direction. As has been noted by countless scholars of media audiences, the ability to rewind, fast-forward, or skip around in a given televisual or filmic narrative is central to how modern media fans engage with their objects, allowing them to review and re-view the gestures, designs, expressions, and other aspects of cinematic storytelling that would, were the objects not materially fixed through the affordances of digital convergence, be considered ephemeral and fleeting. Indeed, although the characters may be narratively fixed, they do become unstuck in even their own timelines through the interventions of audiences who remix, relocate, and reference those ephemera in which they glimpse the utopian impulse of queer possibility.<sup>12</sup>

Although the stories of which these characters are a part follow the general structure of narrative progression from exposition through climax to conclusion, the characters' personal relationships to linear-progressive time do not. I contend that the third requirement of an Avatar of Queer Futurity depends upon their being in some way in excess of normative time. By this, I mean that the characters around whom queer possibilities most easily coalesce are in some way unstuck from straight time, and so

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<sup>12</sup> One of my favorite examples of this may be found on YouTube, where videos with titles like “crowley being in love with aziraphale for 4 minutes” and “Dean Winchester being a disaster bi” have basically ruined my algorithm. Among the most poignantly named of these videos in which fans project their commentary directly onto the characters is entitled “Good M(omen)ts.” Sheer genius.

become unstuck from straightness. This unsticking may be a part of the narrative itself, as is the case with Captain America, who is frozen during World War II only to wake up in the early 21st century, or Dean Winchester of *Supernatural*, who routinely lives on past his own death roughly once per season. The distemporality may be contextual, as with the Sherlock Holmes of the BBC's *Sherlock*, plucked out of his typical Victorian habitus and set down in contemporary London. The characters in question may not be human at all, and therefore not subject to the same experience of linear time as would be expected of a human person. Such is the case with Dean's sometime friend and guardian, the angel Castiel and with the various metahumans and cyborgs and enhanced individuals around whom the world of the Marvel Cinematic Universe revolves.

#### Utopian Imagination in the Convergence Culture Industry

However it manifests, it is through the characters' experience of this temporal disjuncture and the audiences' apprehension of their unstraight relationship to narrative time that the characters themselves come to be imaginable as unstraight. The examples that I will explore in each of my case studies are mainstream serialized media texts that emerged in the midst of the digital media convergence – from 2005 to 2020 – and around which coalesced some of the largest and most generative queer transformative fandoms of that historical period. Much has been written about what kind of texts tend to invite fannish devotion of the kind I am describing, which is to say participatory media fandom. Participatory media fandom emphasizes the active and communal nature of audience engagement with media texts, wherein fans “[participate] within their own networked

communities, [foreground] their own creative transformations and ideological negotiations with mass media texts, and [...] speak back to texts, producers, and fellow fans [...] about what kind of popular culture they want to consume” (Jenkins 2018).

The texts around which this kind of fandom tends to form are speculative in nature, although not so narrowly-defined as ‘speculative fiction’ has come to be: as a more respectable synonym for ‘sci-fi’ or as being oriented invariably toward the future. Indeed, none of my media objects in this dissertation are set in some far-off future of starships and final frontiers or in galaxies far, far away or even in the grim dystopian future of a planet very much like Earth. They are all, importantly, set in a contemporary world that we can recognize as our own, with cars and mobile phones and cultural references that are within our temporal and contextual grasp.<sup>13</sup> Their relationship to speculation isn’t so much temporal as it is ontological and existential, positing versions of the contemporary world wherein things are not unrecognizably different apart from a particular variation: monsters exist and must be hunted, superheroes defend the world from enemies both foreign and domestic, one could conceivably go to grad school for magic. And yet, their settings in a version of our ‘present’ world does not negate, but rather interestingly ‘queers’ these texts’ relationship to the questions of futurity and the speculative. Indeed, Muñoz argues that “utopia exists in the quotidian” and that queerness may best be understood as “a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of

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<sup>13</sup> I am using the collective plural here to describe the cultural circumstances of primarily American, or at least Anglo-American, media production and reception. I emphatically do not wish to over-generalize about the media environments or cultural apprehensions of time to which I am attending, and will be much more intentional and specific about defining my terms and parameters as this project develops.

anxiousness and fear” (Muñoz 2009). Understood thus, the act of speculation might be comprehended as “imagining things otherwise than they are,” and, in the case of speculative fiction, “of creating stories from that impulse” (Lothian, 2018). That drive to imagine otherwise is part and parcel of the utopian impulse, so these stories need not intentionally engage with the future in the linear sense of the word in order to invite glimpses of the utopian then and there within the quotidian workings of the here and now.

And indeed, the ‘too much’ interpretive strategies of queer fanfiction writers that I understand as extrapolative work most effectively in their apprehension of the queerness that is always possible in the quotidian. The kind of writing to which I will attend here is intimately attuned to the temporality of narrative media, often citing the gestures, dialogue, and expressions of characters when they are “on screen” to imagine and expound upon ‘missing moments’ that do not merit inclusion in the limited and limiting scope of representable time (a 45-minute television episode or a 2-hour film). Fan writers extrapolate upon the unrepresentable consequences of representable time, and so their reception of the media in question is not limited to what can be seen on screen. Rather, their apprehension of the characters and their actions stretch out horizontally from any given moment in the text, speculating upon the motivations for each gesture or expression and imagining them in the contexts of the characters’ pasts, presents, and possible futures. Queer extrapolative fanfiction is informed not only by the speculation inherent in texts that suppose the existence of monsters and angels and superheroes, but by the moments of relatable and quotidian unremarkability that are not considered narratively expedient within contemporary popular culture and therefore do not ‘matter.’

This not to say that queer extrapolative fiction can break free entirely of the here and now in favor of the then and there that may only be apprehended in glimpses and extrapolated multivocally by many individual writers within a single fan community. While extrapolative fanfiction as a practice broadly considered may offer resistance to the primacy of media ‘representations’ of queer experiences that ‘matter,’ individual stories imagined by individual writers may—and frequently do—hew extremely closely to “the muted striving of the practical and normalcy-desiring homosexual” at which Muñoz looks askance. Weddings are not uncommon in fanfiction. Nor are children, accidentally-acquired though they often are.<sup>14</sup> Tales of coming to grips with a specific identity and the processes of ‘coming out’ as bi, gay, trans, or pansexual are frequently taken up by fan authors who use their own experiences with these identities to extrapolate on behalf of the characters in question. Characters who do not get traditionally romantic ‘happy endings’ together in the original text can have hundreds of them in fanfiction. In fact, such fiction’s outward transgressiveness — in that it refuses the primacy of heterocentrist interpretation — often gives way to storytelling that is normative and conventional, if not outright conservative. Considered individually, a given piece of extrapolative fanfiction is unlikely to be any more radical or resistant to homonormative cliché than any contemporary mainstream media artifact that invests in representations that matter.

It is in the multivocality of fanfiction that I see important resistive potential, and how sustained interaction with queer extrapolative fanfiction may inflect (or infect) an individual reader’s capacity to ‘imagine otherwise’ with regards to queer possibility and

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<sup>14</sup> There are entire books to be written about the minefield of gender, sexuality, reproduction, and power that is the Omegaverse convention in fanfiction. This is not one of those books.

how it matters in the media we consume. The typical reader of fanfiction will not read a single story within a fandom and call it good, but will consume the extrapolative products of many other readers' readings as she encounters different writers' interpretations of the characters and storylines. In so doing, she will likely come to understand the text as rife with queer potentials as she is filled in on the unacknowledged, unspoken significance of a particular flick of eyes over lips, a joke laughed at too loudly. And perhaps she will begin to notice other moments in the text, will imagine the past that makes them significant or the future they are leading toward. Maybe she will write this imagining down and publish it for other fans to see, adding her apprehension of queer possibility to all the others, all of them significant, none of them definitive. By its nature, fanfiction defies the primacy of a single narrative, and those who interact with it necessarily resist the normative temporality of mainstream storytelling by refusing to accept only what they are told they should see.

### Too Much/Not Enough

For all that extrapolative fanfiction as an epiphenomenon can transcend the often-normative inclinations of single, individual stories imagined by single, individual writers, it is not as though such fanfiction, even broadly considered, is an entirely and unproblematically utopian project. For all that fanfiction's relationship to narrative temporality can occasionally glimpse "the then and there of queer futurity," it is nevertheless inextricably bound up with the representative order of the here and now (Muñoz 2009). It would be definitionally impossible to write extrapolative *fanfiction*

about completely original characters in a completely unique context, and thus such fanfiction must maintain a connection (however tenuous, and they are sometimes *really* tenuous) with the original media text. Additionally, most fans who engage in participatory fandom have a fairly sophisticated facility with many different media texts and have internalized the rhythms and strategies of normative storytelling, along with the sociopolitical contexts in which that storytelling unfolds.

This fluency with the narrative conventions of the here and now is something of a double-edged sword for fans' perception of queer utopia in extant mainstream media objects. After all, it is not as though queerness is the only way of being that is subjected to the straightening impulses of normative time, or that such straightening works in the same way upon all kinds of bodies and subjectivities. For all that habituated readers may be attuned to the workings of queer utopian temporality in the media they consume, their apprehension of those moments of queer potential that can be 'read too much into' is nevertheless limited by the very same temporal logics that they seek to transcend. Fanfiction as a practice, and slash in particular, has recently come under critical scrutiny from both academics and fans who have pointed to the irrepressible whiteness of 'juggernaut' ships in the most popular and productive transformative media fandoms. Angela Fazekas takes note of the 'Two White Guys trope' employed as a means of criticism from fans who have noted that "the preference and focus on conventionally attractive white men is ubiquitous in slash fandom [...] regardless of the diversity of characters and any subtext or evidence present in the canon material" (Fazekas 2014). And indeed, even as representations of racially diverse characters and experiences have come to matter more in the kind of media texts that are likely to invite this kind of

fannish engagement, the Two White Guys trope has remained in incontrovertible evidence in the largest and most popular transformative fandoms.

It is no coincidence that all of the case studies included herein are also notable examples of the Two White Guys trope.<sup>15</sup> In fact, I argue that the whiteness of the characters in question is central to their operation as avatars of queer futurity, thereby exposing the ways in which even ‘reading too much’ in search of queer utopia still fails to be enough to actually arrive there. If it can be said that one of the things that distinguishes a participatory media fan is their fluency with the narrative conventions of a broad range of media objects, then it may also be said that they might—unconsciously or otherwise—internalize the narrative possibilities that are generally afforded to different bodies therein. Sylvia Wynter refers to the “narratively condemned status” to which Black people have been subjected under white supremacist capitalism, noting “the systemic White/Black differential with respect to life-opportunity upon which our present North American order is based” (Wynter 1994). Afrofuturists have long gestured to this disparity of imaginable futures for Black people in the circumstances of the here and now, imagining and insisting upon such futures deliberately and in defiance of the hegemonic temporal order. bell hooks, Christina Sharpe, and others have critiqued the use of Black and brown bodies as visual signifiers of the past, always being pulled backward by the enduring traumas of that past which supercede and foreclose upon

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<sup>15</sup> I have also heard this phenomenon flippantly referred to within fannish circles as “a brunet and a blond with an unbreakable bond,” which always makes me laugh. And alas, all but one of the ‘ships’ that I will consider in my case studies (Quentin and Eliot of *The Magicians* are both dark haired) fit this description.

imaginings of the future. Sharpe refers to this phenomenon as “the past that is not past [that] reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016).

We might consider likewise the comparative dearth of queer extrapolative fanfiction that pairs two (or more) female characters together.<sup>16</sup> There isn’t an equivalent ‘Two White Girls’ trope, and in fact slash fiction as a term has come to definitionally *assume* maleness, with queer female fanfiction designated by the inclusion of the prefix ‘fem’ and ‘femslash’ relegated to its own specialized academic and (often) fannish purview. And women’s relationship to the temporalities of narrative under patriarchy are also fraught. Consider the ways in which a woman’s experience of sexual assault comes to matter—or not—based on the story that may be told about her actions in the past: what was she wearing? Had she been drinking? Did she know her assailant? Had she slept with him before? And while it is certainly possible for (white) women to be imaginable in the future, it is a future that is inextricably bound up with reproductive capacity and with the children born of assumptive heterosexuality. (White) women, then, are not only imaginable within the straight time of the future that merely reproduces the present; it is through their reproductive capacity that straight time comes to be.

As for women of color, Jennifer L. Morgan notes that the exploitation of Black women was and continues to be “central to the binding of reproductive labor with kinship, racial hierarchy, and the economics of slavery” that undergirds the white supremacist and patriarchal capitalism within which contemporary media narratives are

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<sup>16</sup> While my discussion centralizes white supremacy and patriarchy, we might also think about the relationship of time and the future to ability, size, and age for determining what kind of bodies may be most easily imagined to matter in the future. We can also think of monogamy as a central component of keeping straight time straight.

created (Morgan 2021). The Two White Guys trope is so ubiquitous, then, because whiteness and maleness may more easily and intuitively transcend the temporal structures and strictures of the here and now than may the bodies of women and people of color. The present temporal order of white supremacist and patriarchal capitalism is *already* built to imagine the future as the purview of white men, and it is built upon the control of imagined futurities through the narrative condemnation of women and people of color to the past. It is through their inextricability to the reproduction of straight time that the bodies of women and people of color come to matter, and so come to be fixed firmly in the here and now of the present.

For all that apprehension of the queer utopian future is a project undertaken with the intention of imagining the world otherwise, there are some realities of the here and now that are far more insurmountable than others. That is to say: there are ways of mattering that are more easily imaginable than others, and there are bodies around whom the imagination of that mattering more easily or more intuitively coalesce under the circumstances of a here and now wherein it is necessary to assert that Black Lives Matter or that The Future is Female. I do not offer this as an excuse or an explanation for the whiteness and maleness that pervades the practice of slash fanfiction writ large. Rather, I hope that my discussion of the workings of temporality and excessivity on the avatars of queer utopian futurity I've identified here will open up new spaces for discussion of the mechanics of mattering that keep those for whom the utopian future is most necessary from being as easily imaginable there. I will attend to this more deliberately with regard to Captain America – both Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers – and the contestation of narrative and nationhood in representation that matters.

## Choosing Utopia

In the introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz notes that “[i]t is certainly difficult to argue for hope or critical utopianism at a moment when cultural analysis is dominated by an antiutopianism often functioning as a port substitute for actual critical intervention” (Muñoz 2009). While I categorically do not suggest that the fields of contemporary fan and reception studies are devoid of actual critical intervention, I do detect a similar antiutopian bent to the trajectory of a field that began with the celebration of fandom as “an open challenge to the ‘naturalness’ and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies” and slash fanfiction as imagining “a love that is entirely free of the culture’s whole discourse of gender and sex roles” (Jenkins 1992, Russ 1985). While it is necessary and right that the study of fanfiction and its associated communities should become more complex and nuanced, I hesitate at the idea that we should renege on our investment in fanfiction’s utopian potentials full-stop. Again, I do not consider ‘utopian’ to be an unproblematic synonym for ‘subversive’ or ‘resistant.’ Rather, I wish to consider utopia as a discrete phenomenon unto itself — one that speaks to the complex interrelations between text, reader, and the temporal and experiential excessivity of queerness.

In this dissertation, it is my intention to read too much into the practice of ‘reading too much into’ mainstream narrative media in search of queer possibilities outside of or beyond the ‘representations’ that ‘matter.’ In so doing, I hope to trace the ways in which the disciplinary rhetoric of excessivity works to circumscribe the possibilities of queerness by limiting the representations that matter to those that can be

made material. I want to challenge the idea of self-evident progress that has become attached to the proclamation that Representation Matters, and consider the idea of narrative mattering as a means by which the decidedly un-utopian circumstances of the present reproduce themselves into a future that is a mere reproduction of the past. I offer queer extrapolative fanfiction as a means by which even the most seemingly normative and mainstream media objects may hold glimpses of a queer horizon that resists the straightening of narrative time and offers newer, queerer possibilities to those who look for them. I do not contend that such fanfiction is a perfect encapsulation of queer utopian imagination—or indeed that the utopian is even an uncomplicated aspiration. I do believe that, by taking seriously the queer potentials that coalesce so easily around given characters and stories, we may start to more clearly understand the means by which queer utopia may be apprehended even in mainstream media texts. In attempting to find commonalities among some of the most prolific and productive queer fanfiction ‘ships’—a word that operates in fandom as both a noun and a verb— I intend to demonstrate how queer extrapolative fanfiction is “not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future” (Munoz 2009).

## Chapter 2

### The Grit in the Instrument and the Elephant in the Room:

#### The Johnlock Conspiracy and the Great Game of Queer (Mis)Reading in *Sherlock*

*“When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”*

—*Sherlock Holmes*

*The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet*

#### The Adventure of The Dreadful Event

“Killed Holmes,” wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his diary—apparently with some satisfaction—shortly after concluding *The Adventure of the Final Problem* (Grann 2004). Having first introduced his consulting detective in the pages of *The Strand* magazine in 1887, Doyle was by 1893 so disenchanted by the character that made him famous that his only recourse was to throw Holmes off a cliff. *The Adventure of the Final Problem*, in which Sherlock Holmes plummets over the cliffs of the Reichenbach Falls locked in battle with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, was intended to have conclusively severed Doyle’s connection to his most famous creation and deliver him from the onerous expectations of an increasingly enthusiastic and demanding readership. Having grown so sick of Holmes that he likened his feelings for the character to having eaten too

much foie gras, Doyle intended that *The Final Problem* would not only allow him to stop writing Sherlock Holmes stories, but that the conclusion would make it impossible that he should ever be induced to do so again (Armstrong 2016).<sup>17</sup> And even if Doyle's decision to kill Holmes was in part motivated by his desire to distance himself from the detective's voracious public, it is unlikely that even he could have foreseen the strange events to follow.

The widespread outcry upon the publication of *The Adventure of the Final Problem* would have been surprising even if it did not mark a tectonic shift in the history of media audiences. More than 20,000 readers canceled their subscriptions to *The Strand* in protest, such a significant percentage of readership that the magazine nearly collapsed. Letters poured in from incensed readers, scolding Doyle in the most energetic of terms for having committed what, to their minds, amounted to literary homicide (Armstrong 2016).<sup>18</sup> Though likely apocryphal, the image of young men walking the streets of London with mourning crepe affixed to their hats remains vivid in the cultural imaginary of what employees of *The Strand* referred to as "the dreadful event" (Armstrong 2016). Indeed, much of the uproar surrounding this demise of a beloved literary character looks familiar from the vantage point of fan studies in the 21st century, from which we might be inclined to typify the audience response to Holmes' death as 'some Tumblr-ass shit.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It didn't work. Doyle, ostensibly feeling the loss of his residuals from the Holmes stories, published 13 new short stories under the title *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* in *The Strand* from 1903-1904.

<sup>18</sup> Doyle is quoted as having said that killing off Holmes was "justifiable homicide" (Armstrong 2016). Apparently he really didn't like foie gras.

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes there is no elegant way to translate the vernacular of the Internet, where fandom largely operates in 2019, to more traditional academic language. Mea culpa/my bad.

It would, of course, be imminently possible to situate the genesis of modern fan culture at any number of historical points; the first acute cases of Lisztomania, to name just one example, emerged several decades prior to Holmes' feigned demise.<sup>20</sup> And yet there is something about this 'dreadful event' that has stuck in the cultural imagination, adding to the mystique that has accumulated around Sherlock Holmes as one of the most iconic characters of the western literary canon. So many facets of the story feel familiar, from the readers' sense of ownership over Holmes and his stories to the vilification of his creator and the near-catastrophic drop in sales as a result of the serialized narrative's undesirable conclusion. One really need only ask *Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss about the consequences of disappointing your highly-invested audience to get some idea of what cocktail parties must have been like for Arthur Conan Doyle in 1894. The immediate audience response to the death of Sherlock Holmes bears many of the hallmarks of what we would now understand as participatory media fandom: intense emotional investment in a text, highly articulate wishes for and/or expectations of that text and its creator(s), communal—or at least collective—response to developments (positive or negative) in the text, the desire to externalize one's emotional investments through the embodiment of a given textual attachment (Jenson 1992; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Duffett 2013). For all that Doyle may have wished it otherwise, Sherlock Holmes survived his death so effectively that he remains at the center of arguably the oldest

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<sup>20</sup> It is not a new observation to posit that music fandom and narrative media fandom generally function differently both with regards to affect and engagement practices, but the distinction does merit a note here.

continuing media fandom in history, over 130 years since his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the practices that have since become commonplace in media fandom have their roots in Holmesian activity, including, rather confoundingly, fanfiction. Although those early authors of Sherlock Holmes ‘pastiche’ would likely object to their work being painted with the same brush as the headcanons and flash fics and queer smut (oh my!) that populated my Tumblr dash in 2015, they were nevertheless responding to permission from Doyle himself to adapt his characters for their own purposes and with their own interpretations top of mind. Upon being asked by aspiring Holmes adaptor William Gillette if he would object to Sherlock Holmes being married in a secondary author’s version, Doyle replied: “You may marry him, murder him, or do what you like to him” (de Castella 2015). And as there have been more than an estimated 25,000 adaptations of Holmes for radio, stage, and screens of various sizes over the course of the last century, it is safe to say that the zeitgeist has taken him at his word (De Waal 1994).<sup>22</sup> Holmes has been adapted across genres, ages, and historical periods, has solved crimes in Kathmandu and New York City, fought zombies, thwarted Illuminati-esque cultists in a gritty steampunk London, and declined the vampire Mina Murray’s invitation to (re)join *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Norbu 2001; Doherty 2012; MoreSteam 2019;

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, we could debate this assertion for hours using examples ranging from the Arthurian legends to the Bible. The distinctions between folklore and fanfiction are interestingly diffuse, but for my purposes here, I suggest that the fanfiction of the industrializing convergence culture is a phenomenon unto itself.

<sup>22</sup> This number does not include the more than 95,000 works catalogued on Archive of Our Own, one of the largest archives of transformative fan writing currently in operation. To attempt to estimate the number of pieces of *fan* writing that feature Sherlock Holmes across the Internet would be a task of extraordinary ambition, indeed, and would likely necessitate the implementation of a lab model of cultural research of the kind discussed by Gardner in his 2017 essay (Ao3 2019; Gardner 2017).

Ritchie 2009; Moore and O'Neill 1999). And for every author that has availed himself of Doyle's permissive attitude toward his character and Holmes' subsequent (partial) entry into the public domain, there are countless others who have written Holmesian pastiche for their own pleasure, or for groups of Sherlockian aficionados all indulging together in what has come to be known as The Great Game.

The Great Game is "a self-aware fiction that proceed[s] from the premise that Holmes and Watson were real, that Watson wrote the canonical stories, and that Arthur Conan Doyle was merely Watson's literary agent" (Rosenblatt 2017). From this investment in the reality of Holmes' exploits follows the conclusion that his observational methods are sound and may be emulated by any layman who wishes to hone his own facility with the science of deduction. The pretense of their having actually lived likewise makes room for the tacit assumption that Holmes and Watson solved more cases than Doyle published, and that accounts of these missing cases might be 'discovered' by writers looking to try their hand at Holmesian deduction. A tradition of 'pastiche' thus evolved within even early Sherlock Holmes fandom whereby fans engaged the unspoken possibilities of the source material through mimicry, extrapolation, and other forms of textual play. In practicing The Great Game, fan writers assumed authorial power for themselves and used their fiction as a means of demonstrating their allegiance to the Holmesian science of deduction. Put another way: Sherlock Holmes fans invented fanfiction.

Sherlock Holmes has been so central to the development of participatory fandom that it would be unthinkable to begin this project with a discussion of any other character. There seems to be something inherent in Holmes' literary DNA that has made him

particularly conducive to the extrapolative textual play that fans do when writing fanfiction, quite apart from more generalized enthusiasm that the character has invited since his inception. Sherlock Holmes has captured the collective imagination for well over a century, with each new adaptation by a secondary author adding yet another layer to the sediment of meaning that has built The Great Detective into the instantly-recognizable icon he is today. But what makes Holmes so imminently adaptable? Of all the fascinating, luminous characters that have emerged from the human imagination throughout time, why does this figure whose own creator ultimately found him detestable enough to murder continue to captivate us? And how has he so continuously slipped the bonds of authorial control to be used as a means by which fans—both those with million-dollar budgets and those who write for free—imagine and extrapolate and play? Doyle's ultimate indifference to the character's literary legacy cannot be the entire reason, nor some evergreen public affection for mysteries that could not be satiated by Christie or Grafton or Grisham or Poe. No, there is something particular about Sherlock Holmes that has made him both progenitor and progeny of participatory media fandom and of the practice of fanfiction; something that makes him queer.

Sherlock Holmes has always satisfied two of the three criteria that I have suggested identify an avatar of queer futurity: circumstantial excessivity and narratively consequential homosociality. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to the story of what happened when, inadvertently or not, a popular adaptation of the character fulfilled the third. Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's 2010 adaptation of the character for the BBC dispensed almost entirely with Holmes' Victorian origins, setting the detective down in contemporary London where his incipient queerness gained new and conspicuous

relevance.<sup>23</sup> A Sherlock Holmes untethered from the constraints of the Victorian past, whose relationship to straight time was made intentionally unruly by his adaptors, suddenly could not sustain his assumptive straightness full stop. The story of *Sherlock* and of those fans who recognized the queer possibilities of this new Holmes' is both inextricable from the long history of Sherlockian fandom and a product of a very specific historical and cultural moment. It is exemplary of a rapidly-shifting media environment wherein the habituated practices of both producers and consumers suddenly had very different consequences and their expectations of each other were at odds. It is the story of how emerging expectations about what matters in storytelling collided with the epistemological binary that Sherlock Holmes has come to represent, and how the consequences made an indelible mark on the history of media fandom. The curious case of *Sherlock* and The Johnlock Conspiracy exists at the point where the unstoppable force of reading too much into it and the immovable object of 'representation that matters' collide.

### Cold Hard Reason and The Softer Passions

The Johnlock Conspiracy, known as TJLC by adherents and opponents alike, was an example of reading too much into it par excellence that emerged from the *Sherlock* fandom in the midst of the show's third season. I will delve more deeply into the

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<sup>23</sup> The single *Sherlock* Christmas special produced was entitled "The Abominable Bride" and it did return Holmes and Watson to that other, earlier fin-de-siecle. The promotional images for this special caused quite a stir, as viewers of the show had grown accustomed to the contemporary vision of the characters. To put them back in their original temporal habitus thus smacked of a queerness that would not have been possible had the show not played with the timeline in the first place.

minutiae of this reading of the show presently, but must first further examine Sherlock Holmes' impact upon the question of 'reading' and what it has entailed for the history of media fandom. The perception of media fans and fandom has evolved rapidly over the course of the 21st century, to such an extent that the authors of *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* proclaimed a "'third wave' of fan studies, which takes into account the 'empirical' end of fandoms as 'subcultures' [and] reflect[s] the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday life" a mere three decades after Camille Bacon-Smith, Henry Jenkins, and others published the first academic works of the fan studies canon (Gray et al 2007). The colossal mainstream success of what might once have been thought of as niche genre properties like *Game of Thrones* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe has brought more people to media fandom, and the ubiquity of the social internet has made the formation of fan communities easier than ever before. More than that, it has become increasingly evident that there is significant money to be made from interpolating fannish practices into the hierarchical capitalism of the convergence culture industry, wherein authorial power is consolidated in the hands of media producers who "systematically attempt [...] to forward an industrialized vision of fan culture" (Scott 2019).

The fan practices that can most easily be interpolated into this system are those that affirm, rather than challenge, the centralized authorial power of the creators whose products they consume. Fanfiction, by its nature, eschews this schema and indulges innumerable possibilities imagined by any fan who wishes to 'play in the sandbox' of a given hyperdiegesis. The fans who ascribe to the practice are typically characterized as having little interest in the author-ization of their activities by the production-side power

structure, and are therefore not so easily assimilated into the “more monologic than dialogic” relationship between producer and consumer that allows for the affirmational fan’s “industrial incorporation as a promotional agent” (Scott 2019). So for all that certain fannish practices have entered well and truly into the mainstream of 21st century media consumption, it is only those that reinforce and affirm extant power structures wherein all author-ity over the narrative possibilities of any given text is retained by the source creator(s). Those fannish practices do not fit easily into a vision of mainstream fandom wherein fans only ever passively consume and never wrest creative power for their own un-author-ized purposes threaten to subvert the entire structure. They are therefore still met with the skepticism, suspicion, and even outright derision that once – and not very long ago – characterized nerd culture’s relationship to the mainstream media environment. Chief among these practices has been fanfiction: excessive, indulgent, and inherently challenging to the status quo.

Fans and academics alike have grappled with the question of why some fannish activities have been broadly sanctioned within the contemporary media landscape while others are still disparaged or pathologized. Kristina Busse, Matt Hills, Suzanne Scott, Rhiannon Bury, and many others have noted that the distinction between fan practices that have been made ‘acceptable’ and those that are still dismissed largely lay along gendered lines. “[T]he discourses of fandom are influenced by gender,” writes Busse, “not only in the way female fans are regarded but also in the way certain negatively connoted fannish activities are considered specifically female” (Busse 2013).

And here is where Sherlock Holmes’ centrality to the development of media fandom becomes yet more significant. The word ‘fan,’ after all, exists in close

connotative proximity to the idea of the ‘fanatic,’ a figure divorced from reason and ruled entirely by the emotions.<sup>24</sup> And Sherlock Holmes often proclaims that “the emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning” (Doyle 1890). Holmes’ use of dispassionate observation in the service of establishing objective ‘truth’ through the science of deduction has come to be associated with a kind of logical, empiricist masculinity that eschews both emotion and intuition as—as Holmes would term them—little more than “grit” in the otherwise “sensitive instrument” of positivist thought (Doyle 1887).<sup>25</sup> With his refined aesthetic sensibilities, athleticism, and anti-authoritarian streak (which nevertheless almost always reconciles unproblematically with the conservative, punitive ideology represented by his habitual collaborations with Scotland Yard), Holmes can be understood as “an exceptionally striking example of masculinity to Victorian society,” and paradigmatic of a masculine ideal that remains broadly aspirational even as our system of gender ostensibly becomes less determinist (Griswold 2007).

The image of Holmes as ideal masculine subject *by virtue of* his clear-sighted reason unimpeded by the vagaries of emotion implies that the association of emotion with “the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and [...] the female,” in addition to the racially-othered and colonized subject, is necessarily in contrast to empirical reason’s link to “the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the

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<sup>24</sup> Foucault named disobedience by religious fanaticism as one of the three great transgressions that could be committed against bourgeois society, and which would merit “imprisonment pure and simple” (Foucault 1971).

<sup>25</sup> This quotation actually comes from Doctor John Watson’s description of Holmes in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” an 1891 story featuring Irene Adler, known in Holmesian canon as ‘The Woman.’ It is in opposition to Adler, arguably the only female character in the Holmes canon to attain something like her own personality, that Holmes is most forcefully described as opposed to “all emotions, and [love] particularly” (Doyle, 1891). Adler becomes what Kaja Silverman terms “a point of resistance” against which Holmes may most clearly define his own logical/male subjectivity (Silverman 1992).

[white, imperial] male” (Jaggar 1989). If Holmes’ masculinity is affirmed through his application of reason free from passion, then it follows that passion, in obscuring reason, affirms femininity as masculinity’s requisite opposite. And it is not as though this association is anything like subtextual in the original stories. “Love is an emotional thing,” Holmes tells Watson upon the occasion of the latter’s engagement to Mary Morstan. “And whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason that I place above all things.” Holmes is suspicious of women, lamenting that they “are never to be entirely trusted,” as they are creatures whose actions are not beholden to logic but to the far-less predictable emotion (Doyle 1890). It is this unregulated emotion that puts women in proximity to madness and misreading, while the logical application of oneself exclusively to objective and observable facts is the best demonstration of sanity.

It is certainly curious that the seeming death of this character so devoted to reason should have been the impetus for such uproarious emotion among readers. Indeed, it is the notable excess of emotion in the anecdote that begins this chapter that makes it a useful illustration of fannish attachment at all. And so, if fandom is by its nature emotional, and emotion is intrinsically opposed to reason, then the mystery of how the very personification of positivist thought became the flashpoint for an entirely new kind of fanatical media audience is certainly an intriguing one. But there has always been, at least by this fallaciously binary logic, an assertively masculinist slant to Holmesian fandom, with many enthusiasts rejecting the title of ‘fan’ full stop in favor of the much more sophisticated and urbane ‘aficionado.’ Some early Holmes fan clubs represented themselves as ‘literary societies,’ trading the obsessive connotations of the former for the scholarly erudition of the latter. The Great Game certainly requires an encyclopedic

knowledge of Holmesian method and canon that is typical of modern media fans, although it is frequently narrated among practitioners as an intellectual exercise rather than one borne of outsized or inappropriate enthusiasm. The secondary writings through which Holmes 'aficionados' could demonstrate their prowess in this endeavor were termed 'pastiche.' Admittedly, the term 'fan fiction' had yet to be widely embraced in the early days of Holmes fandom, with the first usage not appearing in the record until 1939 (Reich 2015). But even when that term did become available, the boundaries between the emotional, libidinal 'fan fiction' that was disseminated among discrete groups for free and the scholarly, artistic 'pastiche' which was often published and sold commercially were and remain rigorously policed (Busse 2013).

Even though Sherlock Holmes fandom might well be said to be the first media fandom in the modern sense of the term, and even though there has been a long precedent for secondary authors trying their hand at writing Holmes stories, the character is at the same time an agent of the gendered dynamics that have become central to the politics of contemporary media fandom and that have situated certain fannish practices at the discursively-pathologized intersection of queer excessivity and feminized emotion. Queer fanfiction, which deliberately foregoes the imperative of the empirical and observable in favor of the speculative and unobservable world of feeling, is certainly one such practice. For all that the character might well be said to have been the progenitor of both fandom and fanfiction, he has also become emblematic of the kind of masculinist, positivist epistemological binary that undergirds the accusation of excessive reading leveled at fans who find queer possibility in texts where none has been affirmed.

Reading too much into it is typically deployed as an admonition against overly-emotional responses to given stimuli, and is not coincidentally leveled disproportionately at women. Though the circumstances of this accusation are not limited to media fandom,<sup>26</sup> there are certain fannish practices and affinities—slash fanfiction chief among them—that are understood to be the purview of the ‘fangirl’ whose emotions are so excessive and transgressive that they become queer unto themselves. Consider the “very excitable and obsessed” Becky Rosen in *Supernatural* or the ostentatiously seductive Kitty Reilly in *Sherlock*. Think of profoundly strange Tina Belcher from *Bob’s Burgers*, with her “Erotic Garfield” fan fiction and her fascination with butts. The slash-fic-obsessed ‘fangirls’ depicted in film and television display an erotic imagination that is in significant excess of what could be imagined from within the confines of patriarchal heteronormativity, and that is therefore queer in both its inherent excessivity and its implied proximity to queer desire. The excessively-emotional fangirl who ‘reads too much into’ the text of her fandom and insists upon queer possibility where none may be empirically observed seems as though she should be a figure at implacable odds with the very embodiment of positivist masculine reason. Indeed, Sherlock Holmes says it himself to Kitty Reilly when she plays this sort of ‘fangirl’ for him: “You repel me.”

And yet, despite his canonical espousal of the binary of excessivity and emotion versus reason and observation that animates accusations of ‘reading too much into it,’ Sherlock Holmes nevertheless remains an evergreen subject of fannish fascination, even

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<sup>26</sup> A cursory Google search for the phrase reading too much into it yields thousands of articles from magazines and blogs cautioning women against excessively emotional reactions to everything from their partners’ text messages to national healthcare policy. It’s almost as though reading too much into it is a means by which to police negative reactions to discrete incidents wherein the oppressive conditions of structural inequality are most acutely felt.

and especially for those excessively emotional fangirls. The tag for “Sherlock Holmes & Related Fandoms” on Archive of Our Own boasts more than 135,000 tagged works, the most recent of which were published on the day of writing.<sup>27</sup> The tag “#sherlock holmes” on Tumblr has more than 41,000 followers and appears consistently active even in the absence of a new or ongoing adaptation of the character around which an active fan community might most easily coalesce. Sherlock Holmes’ presence on Twitter is likewise consistent, with recent vague rumors of a third film featuring Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law as Holmes and Watson eliciting particular furor. As he has for over 130 years, Sherlock Holmes continues to command the enthusiasm of a dedicated community of fans, even in spite of the many contradictions that exist between Holmes’ avowedly rationalist ideology and the highly-emotional practices of modern media fandom.

Among perhaps the most perplexing phenomena of contemporary Sherlockian fandom is the character’s popularity as an object of excessive reading by fans who have long perceived a whiff of queerness that follows Sherlock Holmes wherever (and whenever) he goes. Though the character himself proclaims that “[i]t is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data,” Holmes has long been read as queer in spite of there being no explicit textual affirmation—either within the original Doyle canon or in any popular adaptation—of his attraction to other men (Doyle 1891). Tags for “Johnlock,” “Sherstrade,” and “Sheriarty” are all notably active on Tumblr,<sup>28</sup> and an examination of

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<sup>27</sup> This tag is the third most prolific among those organized under the heading “Books & Literature” on Archive of Our Own. Sherlock Holmes, a character from the 19th century, is bested in popularity here only by Harry Potter and *Star Wars*, even in the second decade of the 21st. In terms of cultural staying power, the character’s endurance is nonpareil.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Ship’ names are typically portmanteaus of the names of two (or more) characters who are linked romantically/sexually by a given fan community. The three noted here are the popular shipping designations for fanfiction and other fannish activity involving relationships between John Watson and

the tag “#johnlock” on Twitter yields particularly devoted declarations of Sherlock Holmes’ ever-incipient queer potential. Of the 135,000+ works tagged on Ao3 as pertaining to Sherlock Holmes, more than 80,000 of them pair Sherlock Holmes romantically and/or sexually with another male character. Though I know of no dedicated studies that might support this assertion, I posit that Sherlock Holmes would certainly be near the top of any list of the most frequently-queered characters in the history of media fandom. This character who seemingly embodies everything that is the antithesis of reading too much into it has somehow also become an exemplar of the practice. As the man himself might say, the contradiction invites further investigation.

### The Queer Things Going On<sup>29</sup>

Holmes’ self-avowal as an opponent of the feminized emotion that is masculine reason’s requisite inverse positions him queerly within Doyle’s original texts and their historical context. For all that Victorian gender roles were rigorously circumscribed, their assumed differences were all in the service of compulsory heterosexuality and

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Sherlock Holmes, Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Lestrade, and Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty. My attention in this chapter will be oriented primarily toward ‘Johnlock’ as the most prolific of these ships, but the existence and productivity of other queer ‘ships’ involving Sherlock Holmes should not go unremarked-upon. Indeed, even within the text of *Sherlock* there are those who ‘ship’ him with James Moriarty, as depicted in the delightfully campy ‘fan theories’ that are imagined throughout *The Empty Hearse*.

<sup>29</sup> This is taken from a quotation from Doyle’s 1891 story “A Case of Identity,” which I will include here in its entirety in part because it is astonishingly prescient to the questions at stake in this paper and in part because I just think it’s really romantic and I’m only human. “Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outre results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.”

monogamy, making the masculine and feminine complements rather than adversaries. Holmes' vociferous indifference to "the fairer sex" separates him from the Victorian heterosexual ideal, which would certainly include 'breadwinner, husband, and father' among its stipulations. He never demonstrates much enthusiasm for women at all, in fact, beyond a kind of adversarial admiration for Irene Adler and a generally-benign indifference to his housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson. The idea of a Holmes capable of falling in love with a woman would certainly strain credulity given his dedication to everything that is femininity's assumptive opposite; would such a figure even *be* Sherlock Holmes anymore? And his indifference to women is only one of the circumstantially queer things about Holmes. His acute capacity for deductive reasoning, his misanthropy, even his drug use all situate Sherlock Holmes as 'excessive' to the normative circumstances of his narrative reality. His several close homosocial relationships, including with his biographer and sometime-roommate Dr. John Watson, only throw his anachronistic bachelordom into sharper, queerer relief.

Even in his original iteration, Sherlock Holmes thus meets two of the three criteria that I have suggested are required of an easily-legible avatar of queer futurity. He is the 'World's Greatest Detective,' capable of preternatural feats of observation and deduction that sometimes feel like magic. If an avatar of queer futurity must be in some way in excess of 'normality,' be it physically, intellectually, emotionally, or otherwise, then the six foot tall genius with an antisocial personality and a mean right hook surely fits the bill. Likewise, while I suggest that such a figure must have at least one close homosocial relationship that is of material consequence to the plot, Holmes really has nothing *but* narratively consequential relationships with men. Indeed, to say that Holmes' relationship

to John Watson is only *important* to the narrative thrust of the stories would be disingenuous, as it is through Watson's recollections of their cases that Holmes as a character even comes to be. With two of three requirements met, the queer pedigree of Sherlock Holmes is thus well-established throughout the long duration of Holmesian fandom, with some secondary interpretations reading the character as asexual while others explore his unrequited sexual/romantic desire for other men, and most frequently for John Watson. Although queer readings of Sherlock Holmes are not wholly uncommon, they have generally been understood as subtextual and subjective rather than as the dominant interpretation of the character. Several contemporary adaptations have expanded the role of Irene Adler to chief love interest in what I would certainly call a case of 'reading too much into it,' but as of yet there have been no major<sup>30</sup> adaptations of Sherlock Holmes that put him in a 'confirmed' romantic and/or sexual relationship with one of the great many men with whom he cultivates both more intimate and more prolonged connections than his one encounter with Adler. Put another way, while Sherlock Holmes has frequently kissed various maidens-fair and femmes-fatales on-screen in spite of his canonical indifference to women, he has never been legibly represented or 'confirmed' as anything other than either heterosexual or assumptively so.

As Sherlock Holmes is easily one of the most adapted characters of the Western canon, if not the most adapted, this might seem surprising. And yet Holmes' well-

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<sup>30</sup> This phrasing is not to suggest that none of the commercially-published adaptations of a queer Sherlock Holmes are not important, but rather that they do not occupy the kind of ubiquitous cultural space that larger, more expensive 'mainstream' adaptations of the character (wherein he is assumptively straight) have come to enjoy. To compare the box office of Guy Ritchie's slick, steampunk 2009 action movie to Holmes' gently-unrequited love for Watson in Billy Wilder's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970), even adjusted for 50 years of inflation, is almost laughable.

established relationship to linear-progressive straight time lends some insight into why the character has largely avoided the expectation of LGBT+ representation that matters in spite of the circumstantial excessivity and consequential homosociality that are so intrinsic to his makeup. While Arthur Conan Doyle's well-documented fascination with the nascent field of forensics might have influenced the contemporary reception of the stories as having been on the bleeding edge of futuristic scientific advancement, Holmes and his methods have aged into quaintness over the course of a technologically-rich century. The image of the man in deerstalker hat with curved pipe that adorns the Baker Street tube station<sup>31</sup> comes more from illustrator Sidney Paget and playwright William Gillette (along with their many subsequent imitators) than from Doyle. It could be argued, in fact, that the iconic image of Sherlock Holmes that has pervaded the zeitgeist for more than a century is the product of fanfiction, up to and including that most well-known of catchphrases: "Elementary, my dear Watson." In the more than 130 years since his inception, Sherlock Holmes has evolved into a collection of traits and iconography rather than remaining a *particular* character with any kind of specificity, which is what has made him so eminently adaptable. However, that iconography—the deerstalker, the pipe, the cobbled streets and hansom cabs and gaslight lamps—has become so inextricable from the character as to fix him definitively in time, shrouded in the pea-soup fog of Victorian London.

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<sup>31</sup> The first time I saw this image, which is a large cameo-style silhouette made up of hundreds of smaller iterations of the same profile, I literally punched the air. If there is a more perfect visual metaphor for how our contemporary image of Sherlock Holmes has come to be, I certainly cannot think of it.

“The future,” writes José Muñoz, “is queerness’s domain.” Queerness is not yet here; it is always coming but has not yet arrived. It “exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future,” and in extending out in all directions to the horizon resists the “self-naturalizing temporality” that seeks to regulate—to *straighten*—the vast and unruly expanse of queer possibility into narratives that are already imagined to be possible within the normative strictures of a heteropatriarchal and white supremacist present (Muñoz 2009). The past has already happened and created the circumstances of the present, which will reproduce itself into the future along an inexorable and predetermined trajectory toward a single, inevitable conclusion. Straight time insists that what is past remains past, and that the past has no future but the one that exists in the present. Sherlock Holmes, then, for being iconographically fixed at a single historical moment in the past, has no access to a future outside or beyond the straightening assumptions of a heteronormative present. Holmes cannot be queer because he has never been queer, and he has never been queer because he cannot be. The tautology of such a temporal structure of cause and effect assumes that the past is always known simply by virtue of being past, and that only the future can be imagined because only the future has not yet occurred. And yet, even the future is only imaginable within the narrative structures of straight time as an extension of the past, with only those things that have already happened capable of happening again. Pinned to the repressive board of Victorian social mores like a specimen in a museum, Sherlock Holmes cannot change, which means that he cannot be queer.

“There will always be more Sherlock Holmes,” observed Mark Gatiss when asked about his 2010 adaptation of the character for the BBC. “It’s the most popular character

in all fiction. But we thought that we could literally blow away the fog and get back to the idea of these two unlikely men and this unlikely friendship, and that's what we've done" (Wilkes and Levine 2010). Along with co-producer Steven Moffat, Gatiss did indeed dispense with many of the temporal trappings of Victoriana that had become so seemingly indispensable to the cultural imaginary of Sherlock Holmes. The concisely-named *Sherlock*, which has to-date<sup>32</sup> aired four three-episode series as well as the obligatory (and very British) Christmas special, is set in a 21st century London that would be nigh-unrecognizable to the Holmes and Watson of Doyle's original stories. And while this Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) has a cell phone and a Twitter and combats his love of smoking with nicotine patches, and while this John Watson (Martin Freeman) carries a Sig Sauer semi-automatic and publishes Holmes' exploits via his therapist-mandated blog, the essential facets of Doyle's original characters do remain remarkably intact. John Watson is still (depressingly) a veteran of a war in Afghanistan, a medical doctor newly-returned from active duty and at loose ends when he is introduced to a potential flatmate by an old friend. Sherlock Holmes is still the eccentric but magnetic consulting detective with preternatural observational prowess with whom Watson takes up residence at 221B Baker Street. While no longer their housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson (Una Stubbs) is still ubiquitous at Baker Street as Sherlock and John's landlady, and Sherlock's enigmatic older brother Mycroft (played by Gatiss) lingers at the periphery. It is true that *Sherlock* capitulates to the demands of its medium by

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<sup>32</sup> Among the notable things about this show is its temporal indeterminacy. During the program's run, extremely long hiatuses became the norm, with the gap between Series 3 and 4 over three years long (2014-2017). Even now, after what was a fairly lackluster fourth series, star Benedict Cumberbatch has acknowledged the possibility that there will be more new episodes, saying in one interview that "nobody has ever closed the door on *Sherlock*."

implementing an overarching and ongoing plot in a way that Doyle's decidedly more episodic stories do not, and yet facets of those original adventures are echoed, rhymed, inverted, subverted, and subject to clever variation throughout the show's thirteen episodes.

Though initially it may have seemed like a gimmick, Moffat and Gatiss' adaptation of a Sherlock Holmes for the 21st century proved to be the perfect cocktail of faithful and surprising, reverent of the source material but also not precious with it. For long-time Holmes aficionados there were plenty of allusions to Doyle's canon while new fans were drawn in by the show's slick production design and action-film momentum. It certainly didn't hurt that, in 2010, star Benedict Cumberbatch was on the cusp of international notoriety that would make him a household name, albeit a somewhat unwieldy one. Martin Freeman had been a successful journeyman actor in British film and television for years and was, at the time, most widely recognizable as Tim Canterbury from the original British iteration of *The Office*. *Sherlock* was undoubtedly healthy for both men's careers, and they've both since gone on to command significant paychecks on high-profile projects like Marvel's *Doctor Strange* and Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit*. That Cumberbatch and Freeman have subsequently starred in other projects with what we might call significant 'nerd appeal' isn't surprising given the devoted and vocal fanbase that almost immediately coalesced around *Sherlock* after it first aired on the BBC in the United Kingdom and on PBS in the United States. The show was broadly popular with both American and British audiences, with the first episode entitled "A Study in Pink" (an allusion to Doyle's first Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet*) drawing 9.23 million viewers on BBC1 in Britain and another 3.2 million on PBS Masterpiece Mystery in the

United States, figures that only grew as the show gained notoriety throughout its several seasons (Porter 2013).<sup>33</sup> The fannish response to *Sherlock* was rapturous and the show quickly gained a devoted following among the denizens of Tumblr, which was the beating heart of media fandom in the 2010s.

Whether they intended to or not—and this is a question that is at the crux of the events that I will discuss in this chapter—Moffat and Gatiss brought Sherlock Holmes’ queer potentials to a boiling point in their adaptation when they shifted the character’s relationship to linear-progressive time. By plucking Holmes from his typical Victorian habitus and dropping him down again in the contemporary London of 2010, *Sherlock* fulfilled the third requirement that I have proposed for an effective avatar of queer futurity. Holmes set free from the irrepressible pull of the past rocketed suddenly into a figure brimming with queer potential, and the show gained a significant following of fans who were invested in the possibility of a queer Sherlock Holmes finally in a canonically-confirmed relationship with John Watson. The show even played around with the idea, if only in negation, in an early interaction between John and Sherlock where Sherlock himself ‘reads too much’ into their conversation and assumes that John is coming on to him when he asks if Sherlock has a girlfriend. While there were of course those fans who were content to take the show at its word that this friendship would never be anything more, and to ‘read too much into’ this show without the expectation that their reading would be canonically recognized, there were also those for whom the queer possibilities

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<sup>33</sup> The ratings for *Sherlock*’s final episode, “His Last Vow,” were by far the lowest that the series ever had. The abysmal figures for this episode were echoed in audience opinions not only amongst dedicated fans but casual viewers, as well. I will take up the disastrous ending of the show as a question of queer time later in this chapter.

set forth by this excessive, asynchronous Sherlock Holmes proved too enticing to ignore. Like the detective himself, those fans saw the show as a mystery to be solved, and who saw reading too much into it as the means by which to solve it. After all, what is the process of Holmesian deduction if not the extrapolation of hugely significant revelations from the observation of seemingly inconsequential details? Would it really be that outlandish, these fans argued, for there to be a mystery woven throughout this show that could only be solved using Sherlock's own methods? Perhaps the showrunners are letting us have our cake and eat it too: this queer and oft-maligned practice of 'reading too much' will ultimately prove to have been reading just enough. In the end, however, their hopes were disappointed.

Henry Jenkins defines the phenomenon of convergence culture as the ever-evolving circumstances wherein "old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins 2006). The story of *Sherlock* is one of such convergence: of unpredictable interactions and contests of power between the traditions of old media and the expectations of the new, the idealistic, imaginative populism of online media fandom and the realities of funding and timing and logistics that shape the creation of the shows that they love. It is also the story of "extravagantly funded fanfiction" created by two men who were themselves lifelong fans of Sherlock Holmes, and of another group of fans who were so invested in their reading of the show that what began as simple enthusiasm eventually ossified into rigid orthodoxy (Jackson 2016). It is safe to say that no one could have reasonably predicted how the story of

*Sherlock*, of its fans and its creators and their expectations of each other, would play out when the show premiered in 2010.

When “The Final Problem,” the fittingly-named third episode of the fourth season, aired to an all-time low in viewership, the show that had burst onto the scene six years before concluded not with the long-anticipated bang (take that however you will), but with something closer to a whimper. Only 5.9 million people watched the episode live on BBC1, a sharp downturn from the 8.1 million who tuned in just two weeks prior. In his review for *The Daily Mail*, Christopher Stevens did not hold back in proclaiming the series finale “an abject, flailing, noxious mess” (Stevens 2017). Bewildered fans who had only days before been confident that their interpretation of the show would at last be vindicated scrambled for some shred of hope to hold on to, some explanation for what seemed to them a wild deviation from the show’s obvious trajectory. When it became clear that *The Final Problem* really just was *that bad*, some of these fans’ bewilderment was replaced with anger. Hurt. Betrayal. There was an outcry of disappointment from fans in general, with those who thought they were watching a love story perhaps the most hurt of all. The legacy of *Sherlock* is complicated by a cacophony of disparate accusations leveled at everyone from the showrunners to the audience to the BBC itself: accusations of queerbaiting and cowardice and reading too much into it. “Gatiss and Moffat may just have done what Moriarty never could,” said Stevens, “and finished off the marvelous character of Sherlock Holmes” (Stevens 2017).

## A Study in Johnlock

In order to understand what happened to bring this once-lauded show to such an ignominious (ostensible) end, it's necessary to consider its context. The first three episodes of *Sherlock* aired in 2010, at the beginning of a decade during which social media and the collective action it can support would have an unprecedented impact on sociocultural and political lifeways the world over. It entered into the fifth television season wherein GLAAD's Where We Are on TV Report gave detailed statistics about the state of LGBT+ representation in narrative television, and aired in the midst of pitched battles for marriage equality in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The show premiered at the outset of what would be a period of explosive growth for the microblogging platform Tumblr and mere months after the Organization for Transformative Works established an open beta self-publishing site called Archive of Our Own. It followed shortly after the premiere of both *Glee* (Fox 2009-2015) and *Modern Family* (ABC 2009-2020) to much public adulation from the press and from audiences for both shows' embrace of openly LGBT+ characters, and not long after the success of Guy Ritchie's 2009 *Sherlock Holmes* brought Doyle's characters back into mainstream public consciousness. It aired in the early days of streaming and asynchronous viewing, as the very foundations of media viewership were undergoing monumental tectonic shifts.

It was this perfect confluence of technological, cultural, and sociopolitical circumstances that gave rise to the *Sherlock* fandom and the curious case of The Johnlock Conspiracy. Known as TJLC among its adherents and in the fan community at large, The

Johnlock Conspiracy emerged out of the *Sherlock* fandom on and around Tumblr and has since become a locus of controversy, devotion, and fandom ‘wank’ that is not so much notable as infamous.<sup>34</sup> While this reading of the show grew increasingly-more complex—and arguably convoluted—with adherents constantly adding new and more esoteric facets in support of their hypothesis as time went on, the argument of The Johnlock Conspiracy was at its foundation quite simple: that *Sherlock* had been intended from the outset as a love story between John Watson and Sherlock Holmes that would be affirmed canonically by the show’s conclusion. TJLC drew not only on exhaustive and creative criticism of the text and subtext of the show itself, but on transmedia analyses of music, art, and philosophy, on the history of queer media representation as well as both Victorian and contemporary queer culture, and on close readings of other Holmes adaptations known to be beloved of Moffat and Gatiss. TJLCers, as adherents of the conspiracy became known, took *reading too much into it* not as an admonition but as a challenge, believing that the showrunners had hidden clues to their intentions within each episode and that the ultimate solution to the mystery of Sherlock Holmes’ heart could be anticipated by those fans who knew Sherlock’s methods and could successfully apply them.

And it is not as though this assumption that the show was a mystery to be solved was wholly erroneous. On the contrary, *Sherlock* teaches viewers to watch it thus from

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<sup>34</sup> I understand that TJLC holds a contentious place within the history of media fandom, particularly on Tumblr. I know that there are people who have felt victimized or attacked by adherents of this particular view of the show, and I have no desire to question or invalidate their experiences. Likewise, I categorically do not intend to vilify or mock those who were convinced by this reading of *Sherlock*, so many of whom were and are highly articulate and learned interpreters of a text that ultimately did not live up to their expectations of it. You all had me convinced, and this chapter is my attempt to make sense of what happened.

the very first episode. *A Study in Pink* begins with an inciting incident wherein a series of disparate individuals ostensibly complete suicide in exactly the same way, with a self-administered poison. The narrative thrust of the episode lies in the discovery of why and how, with the solution ultimately bringing context to everything that has transpired in the process of its discovery. Small, seemingly inconsequential moments and interactions that pass with little fanfare turn out to have been hugely significant: a man arrives at Waterloo station instead of Paddington, a staffer confiscates her boss's car keys, a woman's favorite color is pink. Indeed, much of the episode's run time is given over to several instances wherein Sherlock's methods are laid out in exhaustive detail, with textual explanations of his observations and deductions overlaying the screen in an imaginative visual illustration of his mind's inner workings. In one particularly memorable and edifying instance, Sherlock invites his new flatmate to consult with him at the scene of a murder where a woman dressed all in pink is lying dead in an abandoned building. After a few minutes of examination of the corpse, Sherlock has deduced the woman's job, her marital status, her hometown, and her reasons for being in London. He has confirmed that this is the work of a serial killer and devised a way of catching the murderer, all based on his observation of the details that others might ignore and his extrapolation of the larger implications that those details suggest. The scene serves to teach both John and the audience about the science of deduction that Sherlock employs and offers us the tools to attempt the process for ourselves. In watching Sherlock Holmes solve a mystery, *Sherlock* teaches the audience how they might do it too.

The narrative trajectories of mysteries are not linear. They begin with the conclusion of one set of events that functions as the inciting incident for another: a

murder must be committed before it can be solved, a locked room entered before one can discover how it was breached. It is in the process of doubling back, of retracing steps and following leads and hitting dead ends and reconsidering context, that mysteries are solved at all. It is the cumulative weight of these retrospective processes that eventually lead to the solution that was already known: a story told in reverse. The structure of each episode of *Sherlock* relies on this temporal alinearity, the cyclicity of each mystery established at the outset by beginning with the end. Each episode of the show begins with an inciting incident: a series of suicides with the same strange modus operandi, an impregnable bank defaced by an invisible vandal, a terrifying gigantic hound roaming the moors of Devon, the inexplicable death of a beloved friend. What follows after in the narrative is also what came before: how is it possible to have serial suicides? How can a man remain completely undetected by the most advanced security system in the world? Who would breed a gigantic killer dog, and for what nefarious purpose? What could I have done to prevent him dying? Quite apart from the temporal queerness of a Sherlock Holmes unbound from the antiquated trappings of Victoriana, the generic narrative strategies of the detective story themselves position the character as something other to the linear expectations of 'straight' narrative time. Mystery stories are, by the standards of straightforward cause-and-effect narrative, fundamentally and irrepressibly queer.

While *A Study in Pink* works as a beautifully self-contained lesson in The Great Game and how it may be played, it also introduces the characters of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson both to the audience and to each other. While Doyle's stories are told from Watson's perspective and therefore always being related to readers retrospectively, the first episode of *Sherlock* follows these two men as they meet and get to know each other

in real time. There are inciting incidents here, too, and conclusions that may be reached from the observation of seemingly small details and passing moments. For all that the clear and present mystery of the pink woman and the suicide pills provides ample opportunity for Sherlock to display his deductive prowess and for John to act as audience surrogate through his induction into this world of mayhem and murder, *A Study in Pink* also presents its two protagonists as mysteries unto themselves. John Watson is a recent veteran of the war in Afghanistan: a soldier without a battlefield, a doctor who needs healing. He has violent nightmares and a limp borne of psychosomatic stress rather than a physical injury, is isolated and alone and possibly contemplating suicide. Sherlock Holmes is strange and intense, alienated from others by his preternatural observational prowess and a distinct lack of interest in the emotional fallout that his talent engenders for those around him. He is more creature than man, it seems, first introduced as a disembodied text message sent inexplicably to an entire press corps at once. When his face is at last revealed, all sharp angles and penetrating eyes, he appears upside down as he hovers over a corpse that he then proceeds to beat energetically with a riding crop; not exactly a paragon of human empathy. Among the first things we learn about Sherlock Holmes, in fact, is that he fundamentally does not seem to understand what might be described as ‘normal’ human emotion. For all that he’s incandescently brilliant in some very specific ways, when it comes to the workings of the human heart, he really hasn’t got a clue.

These two men are both alienated from the world around them, strange and excessive and not-quite-right, each in his own way. Their immediate connection and eventual friendship evolves from their fascination with each other’s strangeness and

contradictions: a healer who kills, a clueless detective. Their individual excessivities also seem to immediately account for the other's assumptive deficiencies, with John acting as a social intermediary between Sherlock and the rest of the world and Sherlock in turn providing him with the addictive danger that John has been missing since his return from war. The adventure of *A Study in Pink* concludes with Sherlock confronting a homicidal cab driver, his own irrepressible curiosity and propensity for self-destruction leading him to very nearly consume the possible poison himself. He is prevented at the last moment by John, who shoots the cabbie at long range through a window, thus breaking his influence over Sherlock and giving the detective yet another mystery to solve. When he deduces that it could only have been John who killed Jefferson Hope, the realization cements the relationship between the two men that has been developing since their first introduction in the laboratory of St. Bart's Hospital. As they walk away from the crime scene, glancing sideways at each other and each smiling to himself, Sherlock's mysterious brother Mycroft utters the phrase that has linked these two characters inextricably in the cultural imagination since the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887: "Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson," already two halves of the same iconic whole even as they are only just meeting for the very first time.

If the hallmarks of an avatar of queer futurity are circumstantial excessivity, consequential homosociality, and unruly temporality, then there is little wonder as to why *A Study in Pink* incited fervent anticipation among fans who perceived something special about this depiction of these two men and their relationship to each other. Both Sherlock and John satisfy all three requirements that I have suggested, effectively doubling the opportunities for queer potentials to coalesce around their relationship and for the

possibilities of romance to take root in the collective fannish imagination. This first episode of *Sherlock* teaches viewers to watch the show as a detective might while at the same time establishing this brand-new age-old friendship as the mystery that ultimately matters most. Why do these two men, each so isolated and strange, establish this immediate and powerful bond with each other? What is it about each that makes him able to meet the other's needs when he cannot even meet his own? How will Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson come to be so immediately recognizable that even the very utterance of their coupled names becomes freighted with such undeniable significance?

In true Holmesian fashion, fans immediately began to observe and to make deductions based on their observations in order to go about solving this mystery. *A Study in Pink* almost immediately yielded hundreds of pieces of fanfiction extrapolating on moments of queer potential that fans apprehended within the show, filling in the blanks of Sherlock and John's unspoken thoughts about each other, lending context to infinitesimal moments that opened up entire vistas of queer possibility. On Tumblr, on fanfiction.net, and in the ever-burgeoning annals of Archive of Our Own, fans engaged in fictive "act[s] of queer world-making" and tapped into the vast wells of queer feeling that could be deduced from a moment of lingering eye contact or the unstudied but telling turn of phrase. This is the interesting thing about filmic media, after all: those interactions between characters which, were they real people, would be entirely fleeting and ephemeral may be preserved in the moment of their undertaking and re/viewed over and over again in the viewer's quest to comprehend their significance. The act of writing extrapolative fanfiction that stems from a particular textual moment of queer possibility is both the elucidation of the already-present evidence of queerness and, at the same time,

the creation of that evidence. “Queerness,” says Muñoz, “has an especially vexed relationship to evidence” in that traditional understandings of ‘evidence’ require fixity, permanence, fact. The fleeting, the indistinct, the ephemeral trace do not reveal themselves easily to “the harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact,” but rather appear as “the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures” (Muñoz 2009). In lending voice and internal context to the gestures and stories that pass between John and Sherlock in their first adventure together, fanfiction writers seek to fix the ephemeral evidence of queerness so that it may be more easily apprehended by others.

Among the most significant scenes in *A Study in Pink* for this kind of extrapolative reading of gesture and story occurs as John and Sherlock are staking out a street wherein they hope to confront and apprehend the as-yet-unknown serial killer. This is the first time since their initial introduction in St. Bart’s that Sherlock and John have had the opportunity to speak to each other about something other than either their new living arrangement as flatmates or the case that Sherlock is currently investigating and on which he has invited John to accompany him. It’s a significant moment in the narrative trajectory of the episode, both because this dinner represents a moment of respite from what has been up until this point a propulsive and fast-paced story and because it is the first opportunity for these men who are still nearly strangers to size each other up. It is worth reading the scene closely for these reasons, but also because it is during the course of this scene that the earliest seeds of The Johnlock Conspiracy could reasonably be said to germinate. In taking the ephemera of the scene seriously as a means by which ‘evidence’ may be found and queer horizons opened up, I will pay particular attention not

only to the words exchanged by Sherlock and John during this scene but also to “the body in motion [that] is the foundation of a visual lexicon in which the gesture speaks loud and clear” (Muñoz 2009).

Having sent a text message directing the killer to Northumberland Street, the pair enter a small restaurant with a large front window from which they can keep watch over the street outside. The restaurant’s proprietor, a large man called Angelo, greets Sherlock warmly. He is the first person besides Mrs. Hudson that we have seen treat Sherlock as a friend, indicating that for all of his pretensions to ‘high functioning sociopathy,’ the detective is indeed capable of maintaining affectionate relationships with others. Angelo explains to John that Sherlock got him off a murder charge and cleared his name. In a heretofore unseen show of modesty, Sherlock demures that he only “cleared it a bit,” since he exonerated Angelo for murder by proving that he was elsewhere committing burglary. Nevertheless, Angelo’s effusive gratitude leads him to offer “anything on the menu,” both for Sherlock and for his “date” (Moffat and Gatiss 2010). John seems taken aback by the assumption, and quickly contradicts Angelo by saying that he is not Sherlock’s date. Sherlock, oblivious to the awkward moment, continues to focus on the street outside, while Angelo, undeterred from his assumption by John’s protestations that he and Sherlock are not on a date, offers to fetch a candle for the table because “it’s more romantic.”

John calls after Angelo as he leaves, insisting again: “I’m not his date!” Sherlock encourages John to eat while they wait to see if the murderer appears while Angelo returns with the promised candle, for which John thanks him resignedly, clearly deciding that the other man’s assumption is not worth his continued protestations. Sherlock and

John begin their stakeout before the large window of the restaurant, although John's back is rather confoundingly to the window while Sherlock sits perpendicularly to his left so that the two are sitting side by side rather than opposite each other. The scene is dim and diffuse, with the restaurant's artistic lighting overhead reflecting in the window as pedestrians and traffic pass by outside. After the initial business with Angelo has been concluded, a pregnant silence befalls the two men as John peruses the menu and Sherlock remains focused on the street. After a moment, John asserts, in an allusion to his earlier meeting with a mysterious man calling himself Sherlock's arch-enemy, that "in real life" there's no such thing. Sherlock responds that if this is true then real life "sounds a bit dull." John asks him again to tell him the identity of the man he met earlier (who is revealed by the end of the episode to be Mycroft), and this exchange follows:

Sherlock: What do 'real people' have then, in their 'real lives?'

John: Friends? You know, people they know, people they like, people they don't like.

There is a pause here, where John inhales noticeably, seemingly steeling himself to ask something in particular.

John: Girlfriends. Boyfriends...

Sherlock is clearly not keyed into the conversation at this point, looking over John's head to scan the street outside and not giving particular consideration to his responses to John's questions.

Sherlock: Well yes, as I was saying: dull.

John: You don't have a girlfriend then?

Sherlock: Girlfriend? No, not really my area.

Here, John does a double-take, nodding and looking down at the table before his eyes cut back to Sherlock in recognition of this statement's possible implications. His demeanor from this point forward is both more cautious and more direct; it is clear that he has interpreted Sherlock's statement as a coming out and is proceeding under the assumption that the other man is gay.

John: Oh, right. (A pause) Do you have a boyfriend?

Sherlock's attention snaps to John. He looks him directly in the eyes.

John: Which is fine, by the way—

Sherlock, quickly: I know it's fine.

Another pregnant pause. John smiles expectantly.

John: So you've got a boyfriend, then?

Sherlock, immediately: No.

It's clear here that John is attempting reassurance, smiling and nodding as he responds to Sherlock's negation. He chuckles. Sherlock's brow furrows slightly.

John: Right. Okay.

Here John licks his lips, smiling as he maintains direct eye contact with Sherlock.<sup>35</sup>

John: You're unattached. Just like me. Fine. Good.

He looks away, down toward the table, but he glances up at Sherlock several times as he applies himself to his dinner, his silverware clinking loudly against the plate in the protracted silence. Sherlock looks again out the window but lacks the focus he had

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<sup>35</sup> Someday, if I ever get to meet Martin Freeman, this is the only question I plan on asking him. Literally how else is one supposed to interpret this acting choice?

earlier. He looks to and away from John several times, clearly about to say something that he finds awkward.

Sherlock: John, um.

John looks quickly up at him, mid-chew. Up until this point both he and the audience have never heard Sherlock interrupt his rapid, fluid pattern of speech with any kind of filler word. This is a notable deviation.

Sherlock: I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and while I'm flattered by your interest, I'm really not looking for anything—

As Sherlock is speaking, John begins shaking his head, speaking over the other man as Sherlock continues.

John: No. No, I'm not asking— no.

John furrows his brow here, as though surprised that Sherlock would have reached this conclusion. Sherlock continues to watch him carefully.

John: I'm just saying. It's all fine.

Sherlock: Good. (A pause) Thank you.

They maintain eye contact for a few seconds before Sherlock glances out the window again, effectively ending the interaction when a few moments later he notices a taxi idling across the street. He and John engage in a foot-chase through central London in pursuit of the cab, climbing up fire escapes and jumping across buildings in an effort to catch up. John, who on the way to Angelo's had used a cane and moved with a pronounced limp in one leg, keeps up easily with Sherlock with no evidence of the limp in sight, cane forgotten at the restaurant.

It might be reasonable to call this interlude ‘the scene that launched ten thousand fics.’ Though other scenes between John and Sherlock in this first episode are frequently taken up in queer extrapolative fanfiction—their introduction is often referred to as a ‘meet cute’ within fandom in deference to the narrative convention of filmic romance—it is here that the good ship Johnlock first really sets sail. Although paradoxically, if *only* the dialogue of the scene were to be taken into consideration, it’s function seems to be to definitively shut down any possibility that these two men might now or ever harbor any romantic or lustful feelings for each other. John’s repeated protestations that he isn’t Sherlock’s date, Sherlock’s gentle rebuff to what he (mis?)interprets as a come on, John’s immediate and vociferous denial that he intended to flirt with Sherlock; the scene interpreted only *as written* has a particularly pernicious case of ‘no homo.’ Indeed, throughout the first two series of *Sherlock*, John frequently protests on the not-infrequent occasions when people mistake him and Sherlock for a couple. It becomes something of a running joke after a while that many of the people whom they encounter in their cases assume that John and Sherlock are together, giving John ample opportunity to deny the conclusion each time. If LGBT+ representation does indeed rely on the affirmative utterance of a particular identitarian noun, then John’s frequent refrain that he is “not gay” should put paid to any possibility for a Johnlock romance at all.

It is in the gesture that this scene at Angelo’s takes on an entirely different cast, lit not by the “harsh lights of mainstream visibility” but by the softer glow of a date night candle (Muñoz 2009). The body is always in motion in some regard, it is true, and so in the normal course of such an exchange as these characters share there is bound to be movement—of course there is. Gesture, though, is a more specific category to which I

will apply myself in an effort to make sense of how this scene that on its surface seems to forestall queer possibility has instead had the opposite effect for so many fans. The gestures undertaken by Sherlock and John over the course of the scene are just as telling as their words, although they seem to be telling a remarkably different story. The “precise and specific physical acts” that I have described above were, of course, premeditated to some degree by Martin Freeman and Benedict Cumberbatch while they were filming the scene (Muñoz 2009). This is not to say that either actor necessarily *intended* his gestures to be interpreted in a specific manner by the at-that-point-imagined audience; if the story of The Johnlock Conspiracy tells us anything it is that authorial intent and audience reception can often be working at cross purposes. Rather, each gesture made by the actor takes on a new life in its reception by viewers whose predisposition for reading too much into it comes from a lifetime of looking for clues, reading between the lines, deducing that which has so long been unsaid in order to find some evidence of their own existence, the faintest possibility of mattering. “[G]esture atomizes movement,” stemming out from a single locus into tiny and diffuse droplets of meaning that land in multivarious new environments and react in new and different ways within their new surroundings (2009). From one phenomenological point within the source text—a moment of eye contact, a lick of the lips—stem out innumerable new possibilities, each with their own loci from which whole new horizons of potential emanate. Gesture is the language of the eloquent unsaid.

The “atomized and particular movements” to which fans of *Sherlock* responded in this scene “tell tales of historical becoming. Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture” (2009).

Given the context of this show and the heavily-freighted identities of the two characters in question, this notion that gesture and its possibilities might have some reclamatory power over queer history proved particularly seductive. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson: even the utterance of their names holds an undeniable sway over the imagination of those who grew up in a zeitgeist so shaped by their influence. These characters who have been so iconic, so enduringly beloved for over a century, whose adventures have become synecdochic for a literary genre with such evergreen public appeal—if those characters were queer, had always been queer, then that would *matter*. Their mattering could change the world, and make it easier for others to matter too. There is undeniable power, after all, in both the assertion that one matters in the world and in the world's affirmation of that mattering. 'Reading too much into it,' as queers have had to do for so long within that phobic majoritarian sphere, certainly accomplishes the first, although the excessivity inherent in the phrase belies the affirmation of the second. However, if the gestures undertaken in this scene were *not* ephemeral, not diffuse or fleeting but rather intentional, particular, studied, then a reading that understood this as a concretization of queer evidence would not be 'too much' but rather just enough. That reading would matter and the material evidence out of which it coalesced would, too. If *Sherlock* was indeed intended as a romance, as a mystery that could be solved using the kind of evidence that had for so long been dismissed as an overly-emotional practice of erroneous misreading, then those who could solve the mystery and their means of solving it would be important, significant, *real* in an irrefutable way. This was, I contend, the allure of The Johnlock Conspiracy for those who believed in it.

The Inevitability is Blatant :-}

There were and remain among fans of *Sherlock* those who perceive the queer potentials of John and Sherlock's relationship without the expectation that their interpretation would come to canonical fruition. Excessive reading is a time-honored activity among media fans, after all, and can be undertaken very pleasurably in spite of the impossibility of authorial confirmation. There was never any realistic hope, for example, that Harry would one day fall in love with Draco Malfoy in the *Harry Potter* books, and yet "Drarry" remains the most prolific ship in that fandom according to Archive of Our Own. The very term for 'slash' fiction comes from the pairing of Kirk/Spock in *Star Trek: The Original Series*, which was decidedly boundary-pushing for its time when it aired the first interracial *heterosexual* kiss on American television; the idea of a canonically-queer pairing between the leads of a popular television show would have been basically unthinkable in 1968. And media fans do tend to be remarkably savvy and engaged consumers, keyed in not only to the machinations of the text itself but to the processes of its creation as well. We tend to know when the writing is on the wall when it comes to authorial confirmation of our more fanciful and playful desires of the text, understanding that the fun that we may have with characters and scenarios does not necessarily require author-ization from the 'powers that be' in order to be meaningful and important. The preponderance of fics set in alternate universes (AUs) that may be found in any given fandom are indicative of this; a multi-billion dollar Marvel movie wherein Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes work in a coffee shop is about as likely as a *Star Wars* episode wherein Finn and Poe work as long-haul truckers. The many pleasures of queer

reading may be had with basically any text, and in the vast majority of cases their lack of canonical confirmation is truly no disaster.

What makes *Sherlock* different? Why did this show at this time precipitate such ardent belief among certain fans that the queer potentials that they apprehended in the text were not only perceptible but intentional, foundational? How did the practice of extrapolative queer reading metastasize as it did into an orthodoxy that, when it proved incorrect, brought so much pain and disappointment to so many? Why was *Sherlock* saddled with a legacy of hypocrisy and manipulation to such an extent that the show has been referred to as “the king of queerbaiting,” appearing at number one on BuzzFeed’s list of “10 Times Fans Were Burned by Queerbaiting [...]” (Alexander 2019; Barnes 2021)? Why was the fourth season of *Sherlock* met with such disdain by the popular press, called “an unsatisfying, auteur ego trip” and “immature claptrap” among other, less delicate epithets (Romano 2017; Stephens 2017; Rivera 2017 among others)? Why was there such an upwelling of shocked incredulity among even the show’s most devoted fans, those who showed their love through attention and time even throughout the show’s sometimes years-long hiatuses? In the weeks following the premiere of *The Final Problem*, the BBC and the showrunners were inundated with feedback from fans—both via social media and through the BBC’s public complaints website—expressing their hurt and disappointment in the most energetic of terms. Many of these complaints dealt with the lack of canonical confirmation that Sherlock and John were in love with each other in what so many fans anticipated would be the ultimate solution to the ‘final problem’ of Sherlock Holmes’ heart. “My ultimate pet peeve right now is when shows decide to queerbait vulnerable audience members,” wrote cultural commentator Monique Jones.

“At this point in time, the media we ingest, including *Sherlock*, can no longer have it both ways” (Jones 2017).

Queerbaiting is generally understood as an industry tactic whereby “those officially associated with a media text court viewers interested in LGBT narratives [...] without the text ever definitely confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters” (Ng 2017). It is, as Joseph Brennan points out, “both a concept and condition of this historical moment (Brennan 2019). Queerbaiting “is seen as exploitative” by fans who deploy the accusation as a means of “holding texts and the producers of those texts to account” by insisting that their reception of the text in question is as consequential as the intention with which the producer put it out into the world. Proving such cynical manipulative intent is, after all, something of a nebulous project in a media environment wherein the sociocultural dynamics between ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ may indeed be evolving, but where the ultimate control over what matters in the telling of a story is still very much the purview of those with the power and means to tell it. The idea that authors should have any kind of political responsibility to their readers is not precisely new, but the means by which contemporary media audiences expect that responsibility to manifest has undergone radical shifts within the first twenty years of the 21st century. The accusation of queerbaiting implies that audiences should be able to hold showrunners accountable for what (despite the significant and often mercenary financial facet to mainstream media storytelling) is still broadly seen as an act of creative expression that is sacred and inviolable: a question of free speech. It is not surprising that media storytellers often meet such accusations with defensiveness, seeming to interpret fans’ demands for higher standards as attacks upon the sanctity of their creative voice. Just so, in the wake

of *Sherlock*'s ill-received fourth season, Mark Gatiss spoke disparagingly back to fans who had expressed disappointment in the trajectory of the show, telling them to “[g]o and read a children’s book with hard pages if you don’t want to be challenged. We’re making the show we want to make. We don’t make it a certain way because fans are pressuring us” (Frost 2017).

Certainly this vitriolic remark was directed at least in part at fans who accused Gatiss and co-producer Stephen Moffat of queerbaiting, some of whom had been reading their show as the lead-up to a canonical romance for years by 2017. The phrase ‘The Johnlock Conspiracy’ first appeared on Tumblr in early January of 2014, in the weeks during which the series’ third season was premiering. According to the fandom’s own remarkable archive of collected meta-analysis through which TJLCers developed and embellished their reading, the concept “sprout[ed] into existence in fandom a few short hours after the airing of *The Sign of Three* [sic]” (Fanlore.org 2022). The tag #TJLC quickly gained traction on Tumblr, where the idea that this popular and stylish show was actually about queer characters proved thrilling to many fans. According to the ‘About’ page of the TJLC Tumblr:

TJLC “refers to the idea that Moffat, Gatiss, [writer Steve] Thompson, [producer] Sue Vertue, and [BBC executive for drama] Ben Stephenson - the whole squad - have intended for John/Sherlock to be canon from the beginning, and lie about it in the press to keep tv’s [sic] greatest plot twist a secret until the big reveal! Due to this, the entire show actually makes more sense when watched from the perspective that Johnlock is going to become canon, and its inevitability is blatant :-}” (Fanlore.org 2022).

This interpretation of the show was pervasive and compelling in no small part because of the idea that Sherlock Holmes and John Watson might at last be released from a 130-year-old closet in a “big reveal” that would be an historic testament to the idea that representation matters. To take the figures of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson who shine so incredibly bright in the cultural firmament and make them queer would be to proclaim that queer people have always existed and that our stories not only matter, but have indelibly shaped the world.

It is an idea borne of the kind of hope that works as “a critical methodology” for those who employ it, “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (Muñoz 2009). If Sherlock Holmes *will be* queer in the future, as the TJLC reading contends, it follows then he *has been* queer in the past and *already is* in the present. To wish for such representation is to wish for a kind of mattering that transcends the instantiative impulses of the here and now, resists “the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (2009). The emergence of the political imperative that ‘representation matters’ is a relatively recent phenomenon, after all, and, when considered within the same linear-progressive logics that animate straight time, could easily be taken to imply that it has only just started to. To queer Sherlock Holmes and John Watson would do something radically different to the inclusion of original LGBT+ characters in mainstream media narratives in that their influence reaches out in all directions, into the past and into the future and emanating out in all directions to the horizon. This is why I believe that The Johnlock Conspiracy was such a thrilling, potential-laden thing right up until the moment that it wasn’t anymore. While the show was still ongoing, the narrative moving forward in short, propulsive bursts followed by long periods of suspended animation, the queer

potentials inherent in it remained in “a sort of ontologically humble state” whereby they were always coming but had not yet arrived (2009). The hope and anticipation of “the big reveal” precipitated an ecstatic flush of creativity that remains, for all that *Sherlock*’s fourth season seems to have largely killed it, a truly remarkable monument to the utopian impulse that arises from excessive reading as a mechanism of fandom’s collective “doing in and for the future” (2009).

Softly, Softly...

Perhaps the most well-known and prolific author of TJLC ‘meta’ in the reading’s germinal stages went by the Tumblr handle loudest-subtext-in-television (abbreviated hereafter, as it was so often on Tumblr, as LSiT). Widely credited as being one of the primary architects of The Johnlock Conspiracy, LSiT understood the emerging sociopolitical importance of representation that matters and foresaw *Sherlock* as a means by which the subtextual reading practices to which queer viewers had been long habituated could be legitimated in an historically significant way. In their extraordinary essay entitled “Softly, Softly: The BBC’s 2009 LGB Research Commission and The Johnlock Conspiracy,” LSiT breaks down a 2009 report from a working group that had been commissioned by the BBC to research portrayals of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in narrative media.<sup>36</sup> Bringing together evidence from the producers’

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<sup>36</sup> LSiT ends their essay with an afterword entitled “Postscript: What about transgender people?” in which they report that “[t]he BBC was advised by the Equality and Human Right Commission to study sexual orientation and gender identity separately,” noting that trans experiences often get erased when they are lumped in with the other letters in the acronym (LSiT 2014). They conclude this short addendum with the reassurance that “we can take some comfort that the BBC acknowledges it needs to be addressed, and that

previous work and public statements about the importance of queer stories with a skillful breakdown of the BBC's funding structure and analyses of the commission's findings, LSiT argues that "*Sherlock* has obviously been a homosexual love story between John and Sherlock from the unaired pilot forward and that the BBC is in on it" (LSiT 2014). They acknowledge at the outset of their analysis that it is perfectly reasonable for viewers—and especially for queer fans of the show—to be wary of believing that such a thing could actually be possible, given "the impression that broadcasters will always cave to homophobia." And yet, they argue, the 2009 report from the Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Working Group gave no indication that the BBC would be averse to a canonically-queer Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Quite the contrary. "[Y]ou don't have to take our word for it when we tell you the BBC would enthusiastically sign on for TJLC. Take *the BBC's* word for it: TJLC is *exactly what their research ordered*" (LSiT 2014).

That the BBC would even feel the need to commission such a working group speaks to the extent to which the world was changing as the first decade of the 21st century drew to a close. The report acknowledges at the outset that the aim of this investigation was to "gain a deeper understanding of what all audiences thought about the way lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are portrayed across [the BBC's] services," no doubt influenced by the burgeoning visibility of LGBT+ people and activism precipitated by the ubiquity of the social internet (BBC 2009). One of the "most comprehensive pieces of audience research ever done in this area by a broadcaster," the BBC Working Group on the Portrayal and Inclusion of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People's report found

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transgender people are on their radar." This prediction has borne perhaps less fruit than could be hoped for, although the BBC did introduce its first ever trans character on the medical drama *Casualty* in 2021.

that “[t]he clear majority of the UK population are either comfortable with, or do not feel strongly either way about, the portrayal of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people” (BBC 2009). It recommended that the BBC undertake “an editorial commitment [...] to better reflect the diversity of LGB people” in all of its content and across all platforms. The working group’s report encompasses both qualitative and quantitative methods, the findings of which are distilled into a series of directives for future action that bear striking similarities to the recommendations of GLAAD’s Vito Russo Test among other enumerative and proscriptive metrics for measuring representation that ‘matters.’ The group identified “appeals for [...] more portrayals of LGB people integrated across all programme genres” in addition to the “portrayal of a greater diversity of LGB people” and a “greater variety of LGB role models across BBC services” (BBC 2009). One recommendation seemed particularly rife with potential for *Sherlock* fans: that the BBC had a mandate to create “overt and/or landmark content tailored to people who are hungry for more portrayal of LGB people, and for that to sometimes be challenging and iconic” (BBC 2009).

LSiT’s essay is a masterful work of content analysis as well as an intriguing consideration of the political and creative economy of the BBC. Collaborating with other fans including skulls-and-tea, 221behavior, and wsswatson, they laid out what seemed to be irrefutable evidence suggesting that *Sherlock* was intended to be the BBC’s flagship for such landmark LGB content. In addition to detailed breakdowns of the LGB Working Group’s findings, LSiT also includes public comments made by co-creators and showrunners Mark Gatiss and Stephen Moffat, from BBC commissioner for drama Ben Stephenson, from Director General of the BBC Tim Davie, all of which indicate an

amenability to the undoubtedly “challenging and iconic” portrayal of a queer Sherlock Holmes in a canonical romance with John Watson. They also account for the ‘surprise angle’ that became one of the animating facets of *The Johnlock Conspiracy* with this quote from Gatiss that became the essay’s title:

I always thought that what Russell [T. Davies] did in *Doctor Who* was extremely ground-breaking, in a slightly more subversive way than it looked like. It never occurred to me that [the representation of gay characters] was too on the nose; what he did brilliantly was introduce incidentally gay characters — obviously as well as some more in-your-face ones. One of my favourite stories is [the episode] *Gridlock*: there’s an elderly couple of ladies who are together, and it just sort of passes by, and that’s the way—softly, softly. That’s how the revolution happens, as it were: you just become aware that people are incidentally gay. I think when the day comes that you have a big detective show where the first half hour was this man at work, and he’s a maverick, and all the usual things... and then we went home and his boyfriend says, ‘Are you alright?’, [and] it was just a thing... then something would have genuinely changed. I think the problem still is, [being gay] becomes the issue. I think the thing with gay characters is that it has to be an issue, as opposed to being part of everyday life — which of course, as we all know, is what it is (loudest-subtext-in-television 2013).

The revolutionary potential of *Sherlock*, LSiT argued, was in its ability to have it both ways: a portrayal of “incidentally gay characters” whose queerness would not be textually remarked-upon until the moment came for the an “in-your-face” reveal that would be both iconic and challenging. Iconic because, given the characters involved,

such a portrayal could be nothing else, and challenging because it would fly in the face of more than a century of queer potentials denied. *Sherlock* was uniquely positioned to show a groundbreaking and subversive portrayal of an English literary hero on the nation's publicly-funded network while at the same time emphasizing the ways in which being queer is "part of everyday life" (2013). Representation matters, the BBC's working group seems to conclude; here is the perfect opportunity, LSiT argues, for it to really *matter*.

This essay, when it was published on Tumblr in 2013, hit like a bomb going off. The evidence that LSiT and their collaborators had compiled and contextualized was convincing not only because it painted a deft and detailed picture of a creative economy at the BBC that would prove hospitable to such queer content but also because it seemed to provide concrete, observable evidence that felt of a piece with the more ephemeral, nebulous potentials that so many fans had already sensed within the show itself. "Until today," wrote LSiT in their introduction, "all TJLCers have had to point to are shell casings, but no smoking gun" (LSiT 2013). Sherlock Holmes himself once observed that "it is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data," as "one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts," but the facts of the LGB Working Group's findings corroborated those gut feelings that were shared by fans who could read the clues of *Sherlock*'s queer potentials, a heady cocktail of evidence and deduction that coalesced into an intoxicating theory: those who had so often before been dismissed for reading too much into it would, in this case, prove to have been reading correctly all along (Doyle 1891).

This foundational piece of meta-analysis sparked a wildfire of speculation, critical reading, and creativity that became its own form of reading too much into it for fans on

Tumblr who subscribed to TJLC. loudest-subtext-in-television continued to write sharp and incisive essays that were widely disseminated among TJLCers who added their own insights and connections on everything from the symbolic nature of tea and mobile phones in the show to John's latent bisexual tendencies (after all, "I'm not gay" isn't the same as "I'm straight") and the significance of the score, the costumes, the wallpaper in 221B. They referenced Doyle's canon, his relationship to queer Victorian writers including Oscar Wilde and Robert Louis Stevenson, they examined Moffat and Gatiss' previous work for hints of what was to come. I personally recall being delighted to have it pointed out that Stephen Moffat had already included a fairly unambiguous lesbian version of Holmes and Watson while a writer and showrunner on *Doctor Who*, and that Gatiss' record as a writer, producer, and actor indicated that his identity as a gay man himself was not ever incidental to his work. It seemed that every detail of the show and of everything even tangentially connected with it was suddenly rife with hidden significance, with endless potential that could be interpreted in the service of this hopeful, clever, and now even *probable* theory.

I need to pause here to note that, for all that what happened later has in some ways soured the legacy of this robust collaborative reading of *Sherlock*, there was a time when The Johnlock Conspiracy was truly, genuinely *fun*. I myself only dabbled in writing meta during what many fans called 'The Great Hiatus' between series 3 and 4, dipping my toe in to note the similarities of appearance and styling between Cumberbatch's Sherlock and one of John's beleaguered girlfriends played by Oona Chaplin. Upon first reading Foucault's *A History of Sexuality Vol. 2* as a Masters student in London, I was delighted to discover a reference to Diogenes, the Greek philosopher after whom Mycroft Holmes'

Pall Mall social club is named. The Diogenic tenet that “if breakfast be not absurd, neither is it absurd to breakfast in the marketplace” resonated with me; it felt like a logical metaphor for the shifting expectations around LGBT+ representation and the likelihood that I and those others who had queer hopes for *Sherlock* would find ourselves eventually vindicated (Foucault 1990). If it is indeed true that representation matters, as we are constantly being told it does not only by the social internet but also increasingly by the ‘powers that be’ of mainstream media, then representation should matter in public, out loud. Subtextual play and reading too much into it are all well and good when no other recourse exists, but if LGB people really *are* important, and if the BBC acknowledges its mandate to “portray and celebrate the range of cultures and communities across the UK,” then there should be no reason not to do so in such an iconic, groundbreaking, landmark way (BBC 2009). If representation matters, then let it *be* matter.

I read a lot more *Sherlock* meta than I ever felt compelled to write, and am still in awe of the incandescently brilliant, thoughtful, sometimes silly extrapolative play that this ‘Conspiracy’ engendered for those who engaged with it. Even within the assumptively<sup>37</sup> inclusive, progressive space of Tumblr fandom in the 2010s, the energy of this reading and the community that undertook it felt optimistic and electric, hopeful and anticipatory of another, better world that would emerge in that not-so-far-off time “when Johnlock becomes canon” (Jackson 2016). It felt, at the time, almost utopian, in that

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<sup>37</sup> It cannot go without saying that Tumblr was not then and never has been anything like the social justice utopia that it sometimes appeared on its surface. Much has been written and much more will be on the white supremacy and cisnormativity of ostensibly ‘woke’ fandom spaces including Sherlock fandom and TJLC in particular. Rukmini Pande, JSA Lowe, Angela Fazekas, Melissa Hoffman, and others all capably attend to this.

“[q]ueerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring.” The trading of theories, extrapolation on moments of queer possibility within the text, the inevitable shitposting and fluff and crack<sup>38</sup> that were sprinkled in around the fan-scholarly analysis—all of it felt profoundly connected and connecting, a collective imagining undertaken in the service of “that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise” (Muñoz 2009). The hopeful reverberations of TJLC brought forth beautiful fan art and video remixes, music and cosplay and a truly staggering amount of fanfiction. It spawned a series of video essays that totaled nearly 40 hours entitled *TJLC Explained* that covered everything from the minutiae of *Sherlock*—the significance of different beverages and the in-joke of the elephant in the room—to a deep dive into Wilder’s *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* and its implications for Moffat and Gatiss’ version of the character. Rebekah of *TJLC Explained* also went through the series episode by episode, effectively ‘reading too much into’ each in keeping with the theories that were being collectively generated on Tumblr. It was and remains a fascinating document of “[t]he queer utopian project” that thrives on “the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny of the homonormative” (Muñoz 2009).

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<sup>38</sup> Shitposting: “in its broadest terms, refers to low quality, non-productive posting in internet forums and discussions, sometimes meant to include sharing memes. Some definitions state that it is content used to provoke maximum impact or engagement with minimum effort (fandom.com).” Fluff: “Fanfic without angst; any pleasant, feel-good story. Fluff may lack plot; however, unlike a PWP the focus is not sex, but displays of affection between two or more characters, whether their relationship is romantic or not (Fanlore.org) Crack: “A work of fan fiction that is absurd, surprising or ridiculous, often intentionally” (Wikitionary.com).

## It's Not The Fall That Kills You, It's The Landing

In my estimation as someone who was more intimate observer than participant, this horizontal, excessive reading of *Sherlock*'s "queerness [was, initially,] primarily about futurity and hope" based "on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity" (Muñoz 2009). It would have been quite impossible for any one person to have generated all of the theory, analysis, and art around which this reading coalesced; the collective imagining from which TJLC was created was, in a very real way, emblematic of a shared desire to "enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds." The 'new world' that TJLC envisaged in the canonical queerness of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson was certainly perceived by many who did not share their interpretation to be "oddball or manic" and "naively romantic," criticisms with which queer utopian thinking often gets maligned (Muñoz 2009). And, as it turns out, all of the myriad potentials of *The Johnlock Conspiracy* were eventually foreclosed by the final problem of the ill-fated series 4. In the end, TJLC's expectations of representation that matters superseded the communal pleasures of reading too much into it that had animated the collective imagining, narrowing all the vast expanses of the horizon down to a single path that locked around the feet, the winding, branching road becoming a river with only one destination.<sup>39</sup> In insisting, after all, that the apprehension of queer possibility was only real if it resulted in representation that

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<sup>39</sup> The first episode of *Sherlock* series 4, *The Six Thatchers*, ends with a voiceover from Sherlock Holmes that alludes to the story of Death in Samara that has been referenced several times over the course of the episode. He poses the question of whether it is ever possible to avoid the preordained using the metaphors of road and river that I've sampled here. "When does the path we walk on lock around our feet? When does the road become a river with only one destination? Death waits for us all in Samara, but can Samara be avoided" (Moffat and Gatiss 2017).

mattered—that queerness must be made material in being represented—TJLC inevitably ended with an acute and far-reaching “sense of ‘bad feelings’ that mark the affective disjuncture of being queer in straight time” (Muñoz 2009).

The scholarly retrospectives have been numerous with reference to the curious case of *The Johnlock Conspiracy*, as evidenced in the work of Bo Allesøe Christensen and Thessa Jensen, Melissa A. Hofmann, E.J. Nielsen, Diana Anselmo, and Willa Paskin among others. Fans and academics, and of course those of us who are both, continue to try to make sense of the events of *Sherlock* series 4, with some crying production-side queerbaiting while others blame TJLCers’ “‘cult like’ groupthink and ‘crazy demands’” for insisting that the show’s creators owed them better than subtext (Hofmann 2018). E.J. Nielsen points to the ways in which what I contend began as “a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold [... of] straight time [could be] interrupted or stepped out of” also undeniably devolved over the years into “a fascinating case study, a perfect storm in how fandom and shipping can go very wrong” (Nielsen 2019). While TJLC was exhilarating and rife with possibility for those who felt connected to it, fandom is not a utopia, and like all particularly rich sites of queer theorizing, “needs to be grasped as both antirelational and relational” (Muñoz 2009). Nielsen summarizes TJLC thusly:

“a group made up primarily of young female fans who use traditionally transformative fan tools (social media, fan works, meta) to instead reify their affirmational reading as the only correct way of reading the text. They then use these same tools to ‘police’ other fans” (2019).

While I take umbrage with the emphasis with which gender is attached to TJLC in this summary—I cannot help but wonder if the use of the word ‘female’ here does not

resonate with that Holmesian moral dualism between logic and emotion — it is certainly true that things could get very nasty on fannish Tumblr while *Sherlock* fandom was in its most productive period. The potent cocktail of social justice discourse, erotic content,<sup>40</sup> and fandom that were the three major pillars of Tumblr in its prime made fertile ground for queer identity formation, but also for disputes and contestations of identity that could easily hit on raw, tender feelings for all involved. Christensen and Jensen explore how Tumblr “can be a confusing and dangerous place to practice fandom,” as it can make it very easy for “fans [to] not embrace diversity or criticism but rather enforce a certain kind of singularity” (2018). I categorically do not condone the kind of intra-fannish policing that an overly-affirmational ascription to TJLC allowed, and nor do I intend this discussion as an excuse for the bad feelings that TJLCers could and did engender for others in an effort to transcend their own. Adherent to TJLC or otherwise, ‘*Sherlock fan*’ is still an imagined subjectivity, and “[i]maged subjectivity is [...] not just about systems of value; it is also always about who has power over cultural representations and cultural claims to legitimacy, and who is able to claim ‘good’ and moral subjectivity while pathologizing other groups as morally or mentally defective” (Hills 2002). For all that it was borne from a utopian impulse, TJLC could not avoid the fate of all utopias, which is there in the name: utopia means nowhere, because it cannot exist.

Those for whom this eventuality of a canonically queer Sherlock Holmes mattered so much undoubtedly included fans who had *long* been told that they were

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<sup>40</sup> This isn’t the place to talk about pornography on Tumblr or its impact on the productivity of other facets of the platform, but suffice it to say that I once heard Abigail de Kosnik refer to the platform as a bastion of creative and sexual culture something akin to Berlin between the wars. When Tumblr banned adult content in 2018, it rather spelled the end of the entire ecosystem. It’s a fascinating story worthy of its own lengthy consideration elsewhere.

reading too much into it when they perceived the possibility of queerness within a given media text. ‘Fangirl,’ after all, is also an imagined subjectivity, and one with a particularly pernicious and damaging connotation within the structures of the sociopolitical gender binary. If queerness is only ever perceptible as the ephemeral, as the “barely perceptible,” as the trace but nothing more, then those who can sense it are told from all sides that they cannot trust the evidence of their own eyes (Allington 2007). As Sherlock learns to his woe in *The Hounds of Baskerville* (episode 2.2), that way lies madness. It makes perfect sense to me that those who had so often been pathologized as “morally or mentally defective” for their excessive reading practices—an accusation undergirded by an epistemological divide embodied by Sherlock Holmes himself—would find the possibility of vindication and affirmation that they were not ‘too much’ but finally, at last *enough* too alluring to ignore. The legitimacy and legibility of representation that matters offers fixity and rest, respite from the constant Sysiphean effort of reading too much in order to find yourself anywhere, in any of the stories we tell. It is not an excuse for TJLCers to have turned the violence of invalidation and moralizing onto others just because it felt for a moment as though the shoe was finally on the proper foot, but I think it may be an explanation.

Sherlock Holmes is the character who more than any other embodies the sociocultural legitimacy that comes with rationality and reason; who better to usher in a new world in which queerness is not only possible, but reasonable? Logical? The only possible explanation? The epigraph that begins this chapter was echoed throughout Tumblr in the years between series 3 and 4 of *Sherlock*, when TJLC was at its most productive and “queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality [felt most like] a path and

a movement to a greater openness in the world” (Muñoz 2009). “When you have eliminated all which is impossible,” Holmes says to Watson in Doyle’s *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*, “then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” In a world that seemed to be shifting so rapidly—where social media and the connections it invites were allowing queer people to find themselves and each other in ways heretofore unprecedented, where the possibilities of marriage and children and recognition and *belonging* felt suddenly well within reach, where there were gay men and lesbians appearing on screens who were not there merely to be laughed at or to die—how could it be possible in this seemingly new and better world that queerness could still fail to matter enough to represent it here? It would shake the world to have this, or so it felt in those ecstatic moments of queer possibility when TJLC’s exhilarating blend of ‘reading too much’ and ‘representation matters’ captured the imagination. It was *impossible* that this eventuality, this always-coming-not-yet-arrived someday “when Johnlock becomes canon,” did not matter (Jackson 2016). It was impossible, so it could be eliminated. That which remained might seem improbable from outside of the “structuring and educated mode of desiring” that queer utopian reading allowed, but for those who knew that they could trust the evidence of their own eyes, the then and there of TJLC must surely be the truth (Muñoz 2009).

In the early days of The Johnlock Conspiracy, loudest-subtext-in-television concluded their “Softly, Softly” essay thusly:

“If you can imagine [commissioner Ben Stephenson] turning down TJLC, you have a far better imagination than me. I’m pretty sure he would set himself on fire if he thought it would be a history-making moment for BBC drama” (2013).

The BBC's Working Group had established nearly a decade before that LGB representation needed to matter in a more material way in their programming across the board. In their report, they recommended "challenging and iconic" portrayals of queer experience that would substantively contribute to the representation of all of the United Kingdom's diverse people and communities. Having been steeped in the ecstatic queer imagination of the "then and there of queer futurity," it felt impossible that *Sherlock* wouldn't include such a portrayal because such representation didn't matter; the showrunners and their network had said that it did. The idea that it was merely institutional homophobia was also out. As LSiT observed: "There is an upside to living in a world where people find a sexual relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson to be a challenging concept: the BBC would totally air that, for precisely that reason" (2013). If queer representation did indeed matter, then TJLC had never been about 'reading too much into it.' But as weeks turned to months it became increasingly clear that there was no turn of the tide forthcoming, and it became increasingly difficult not to contemplate another possibility: that if TJLC had never been anything more than 'reading too much into it,' then maybe it followed that representation didn't matter after all.

"When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." This longing for queer romance, it seemed, was ultimately proven to be impossible. The representation did not matter. What did that imply, then, about all the people for whom the possibility of it had? The "bad feelings" of being queer in straight time come from the sudden, violent locking of the road around your feet, from the narrowing of the horizon into a solid, inevitable tunnel, from the

foreclosure of all but a single future in which it is not only possible but probable that you don't, and haven't, and won't ever belong. Generally speaking, queers have become remarkably proficient at "strain[ing] our vision and forc[ing] it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now." We imagine, we feel, we read too much. There is untold possibility in the enthusiasm of fannish attachment, in the "[a]stonishment [that] helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place." The danger comes in relying too much upon the logics of mattering that animate "the quagmire of the present" and in too easily conflating that which is possible with that which is true (Muñoz 2009). The Johnlock Conspiracy did not fail because it was wrong. Those who read the show this way were not crazy or hysterical or 'reading too much into it.' The capital mistake of TJLC was not theorizing in advance of the data, but of putting too much trust in a vision of the world in which the ephemeral, ecstatic possibilities of queerness that they had so diligently collected was or ever could be conclusively made matter and *to* matter.

#### Secret Sisters, Cereal Killers, and High Camp Melodrama

By the end of *The Final Problem*, two things seemed to be irrefutably clear: one, there had been no kisses, no love confessions, no emergence of the long-anticipated confirmation of John and Sherlock's romance. Two, it seemed that no new episodes would be forthcoming, as the episode ended with an incontrovertibly final-sounding speech made by John's wife Mary from beyond the grave. Fans had waited for years for the resolution of the cliffhanger endings to previous series, and the deviation from that

pattern seemed to indicate a definitive end to *Sherlock*'s ongoing narrative. As I've already taken no small bit of pleasure in describing, it was not only fans—TJLCer or not—who found the season's trajectory to be wholly unsatisfactory. The general consensus seemed to be that Moffat and Gatiss had fallen prey to their own outsized self-conception, a desire to demonstrate their cleverness that superseded the imperative of narrative sense. And series 4 of *Sherlock* is surely very silly. Mrs. Hudson drives a Lamborghini and John's therapist shoots him with a tranquilizer gun and Sherlock has a secret supervillain sister (who is also, as it turns out, that very same therapist) whom Mycroft has basically had sent to Azkaban. The Holmes siblings always seem to be doing grand Machiavellian experiments on each other: Sherlock and John turns Mycroft's mansion into a haunted house complete with ghost child and killer clown (both of them turn out to be nameless drug addicts hired by Sherlock<sup>41</sup>) and later in the same episode are all three trapped in the remote island prison at Sherrinford where Eurus, the Holmes boys' secret genius sociopath sister, has long been an inmate who is now running the asylum.

Even before (to use the technical term) the absolutely bonker-balls soap-opera-cum-*Saw* energy of *The Final Problem*, series 4 feels like everything has very much gone off the rails. There is a lot of hand-waving of very serious medical problems (both of Sherlock's kidneys are failing at one point?) that seem to be gone just as quickly as they arrived, and John and Mary's infant daughter Rosie seems to pop in and out of existence at the screenwriters' discretion. For a show that had in its early seasons taken great pains

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<sup>41</sup> Yikes.

to ‘show its work’ with regards to the science of deduction and Sherlock’s sometimes almost magical aptitude for it, the character seems by the series’ conclusion more like a wizard than a detective. The editing is frenetic, the scenes crowded, the plots convoluted enough to baffle Doyle himself. At one point Eurus spends all night walking the streets of London with Sherlock while disguised as the daughter of a wealthy philanthropist named Culverton Smith who confesses his sins only to those who have taken a memory-wiping intravenous drug. In what must have surely been a satisfyingly clever connection for Moffat and Gatiss, Smith’s great inspiration is American serial killer H.H. Holmes and he has used his cover as a well-known philanthropist to build himself a ‘murder wing’ in a London hospital. He even hides in plain sight by admitting to being a ‘cereal killer’ in a television commercial where he shills for a healthy breakfast. Mary Watson is a retired assassin whose past eventually catches up to her and she jumps in front of a bullet for Sherlock and dies in the London Aquarium. This causes John to temporarily estrange himself from Sherlock and Sherlock to relapse into using what seems to be all the drugs in England. At one point, Eurus sends a drone to blow up 221B and Sherlock and John must jump out the window as their flat explodes. At another, Mycroft takes up his ever-present umbrella to reveal that it has been hiding a sword with a gun for a handle all along. Eurus flawlessly impersonates a little girl on a crashing plane. Mary knocks Sherlock out with a chloroformed letter. John is imprisoned in the bottom of a well among the bones of Sherlock’s forgotten childhood friend.

The confusion, disappointment, and even outright derision with which these three new episodes of *Sherlock* were met by critics in January of 2017 were nothing to the responses they garnered from within the show’s devoted fandom. For some fans, the

episodes were enjoyably wacky, for others merely dumb. For those who thought that season 4 would bring about the canonical reification of queer possibility between the series' two leads, reactions seemed split between bewildered betrayal and a refusal to admit defeat. In what I take as a self-aware acknowledgement that they were indeed starting to sound a little crazy, some TJLCers who couldn't believe that their beloved show would really disappoint them thus began referring to themselves as 'the tinfoil hat brigade' as they waited expectantly for a secret fourth episode that would set everything to rights. There was even a theory that this episode would air in the broadcast slot belonging to the first episode of the BBC drama *Apple Tree Yard* that premiered on BBC One two weeks after *The Final Problem*. The argument was that Ben Stephenson, Steven Moffat, Mark Gatiss and "the whole squad" would want to make television history by pulling a fast one on an entire country and *Sherlock's* viewership around the world (Fanlore 2022). Perhaps there would be a few minutes of *Apple Tree Yard*, but then the twist would happen and the show would turn out to have been diegetic to *Sherlock's* London all along. It sounds improbable because it was, and *Apple Tree Yard* aired three episodes with no malevolent interference from Moriarty or Mycroft, no secret ex machina from Moffat and Gatiss.

*Sherlock* did not conclude with a declaration of mattering or the vindication of a reading that had never been 'too much' but was only ever enough. It didn't end with a kiss, or a quiet admission of love, or with a splashy twist ending masquerading as a totally unrelated television program. Sherlock, in the end, was not 'confirmed' as gay. John was not (openly) bisexual. No one got married or marched at London Pride, as has happened in so many fanfics I've read that it would be impossible for me to credit them

all. And yet, for all that series 4 of *Sherlock* can't be marked down as a victory for LGBT+ representation that matters, and for all that the show cannot now even be mentioned without the specter of queerbaiting being conjured, the fourth series of *Sherlock* might be the queerest of the entire show. It is rife with "the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not," the "essential element [of...] seriousness that fails" (Sontag 1964). Trends in the 'prestige' television aesthetic of the 2010s have tended toward the angsty, the iterative, the self-congratulatory 'seriousness' that accompanies 'important art.' Series 4 feels like it wants to be 'important,' wants to delve deeply into the psyche of The Great Detective and deconstruct the notion that "an unprincipled drug addict was some kind of gentleman hero" (Moffat and Gatiss 2016). It takes on bereavement and estrangement and alcoholism and drug addiction, repressed trauma and family dysfunction and the possibility of healing. Thematically, it looks at first glance like HBO catnip but is done in such a seemingly self-serious and goofy way that there really is nothing to do, after all is said and done, but shake one's head and laugh.

...And It Is Always 1895<sup>42</sup>

Maybe there is something healing in the failure, in reveling in the ways that representation can be stupid or silly or dumb, and anticipating the endless potential for something better next time. "Queerness," after all, "is not yet here." For all that it has

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<sup>42</sup> The beautiful sonnet '221b' by Vincent Starrett ends with the couplet "Here, though the world explode, these two survive/and it is always 1895." There's no commentary I could add that would make that better than it is, so I won't try.

been and remains vitally, life-givingly essential for us to know that we matter and have our mattering affirmed by others, perhaps it is equally essential to understand that “[w]e may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz 2009). The series’ concluding shot—and conceivably the final image of the show *ever* — is of John and Sherlock frozen mid-run, exiting a building side by side, their eyes fixed the horizon past the camera. Like Thelma and Louise or Butch and Sundance before them, maybe it is in this frozen moment that the queer potential of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson really lies. Mysteries have solutions, this is true enough, but having a solution means also having an ending. Suspended here is mid-flight, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson cannot end but remain, as they ever have, there in the collective imagination side by side.

And it is not as though the less-than-happy conclusion to curious case of The Johnlock Conspiracy and the disappointment that fans felt in the wake of series 4 has dampened the apprehension of this Sherlock and this John as avatars of queer futurity unlike any other version of the characters. I still hold that Holmes and Watson have always been very nearly perfect avatars of queer futurity, and in “blow[ing] away the fog and get back to the idea of these two unlikely men and this unlikely friendship” by bringing them both into the 21st century, *Sherlock* made their queer potentials undeniable whether Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss intended to or not. In taking two characters who were already in excess to their narrative circumstances, whose relationship to each other was so foundational to their story, and untethering them from the “self-naturalizing temporality of straight time” where both the past and the future can only ever be the same as the present, this adaptation of Conan Doyle’s Great Detective proved fertile ground for

queer imagination, for ‘reading too much into’ the possibility of a new world that was always on the horizon but might never fully arrive.

*Sherlock* is far from a perfect show, and the fandom that coalesced around it was likewise fraught with problems and misreadings and bad feelings and hurt. And yet one look at Archive of Our Own at the time of this writing shows that fans are still using this imperfect perfect thing as a means by which to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz 2009). Sherlock openly and honestly confronts his drug addiction. John learns how to mourn. Rosie Watson grows up at 221B Baker Street under the care of two parents who are honest with her and with each other. Sometimes John and Sherlock reconcile right away after Mary’s death, sometimes it takes years. Sometimes Eurus was just a drug trip, and sometimes the Holmes family must address the roots of a dysfunction that harmed all three of their children. Sometimes Sherlock and John return to that restaurant and reenact that scene that launched a thousand fics. They order dinner and sit by the window and when Angelo brings a candle so it all feels more romantic, no one raises any objection. The lack of a single, definitive ending or “challenging and iconic” moment of television history has not inhibited John and Sherlock from falling in love and growing old together, solving cases and causing mischief and eventually retiring to a cottage in Sussex over and over again, thousands of times and in thousands of different ways.

I haven’t really talked about *The Abominable Bride* at all here, the strange asynchronous episode of *Sherlock* that was billed as a holiday special but which has very little to do with Christmas. This may be a significant oversight if my aim here has been to tell the full and complete story of The Johnlock Conspiracy, but alas, that story will have

to find another author. In it, the fog of Victorian London rolls back in and Sherlock and John are once again transformed into Holmes and Watson, set back down in the London of Doyle's imaginings. There is, as ever, a lot going on in *The Abominable Bride*, not all of it interesting or relevant or even good. But there is a remarkable denouement at the episode's end that I have returned to when I've felt hurt or discouraged or as though those things that are important to me do not and will not matter. Holmes and Watson are ensconced in their chairs before a roaring fire, imagining a world full of "flying machines" and "telephone contraptions" and all the "lunatic fantasy" of "what a future world might look like and how [they] might fit inside it" (Moffat and Gatiss 2016). Holmes admits that it may all sound a bit fanciful, might even sound impossible from inside the close confines of this buttoned-up Victorian society, but still maintains that "perhaps such things could come to pass." He stands to gaze out the windows of 221B Baker Street, remarking that he "would be very much at home in such a world," being, as he is, "a man out of his time" (Gatiss and Moffat 2016). As the main theme of *Sherlock* swells and Holmes draws on his pipe, the camera too draws back and back, out the window of 221B and out onto the streets of 21st century London where pedestrians crowd and traffic hurries by along Baker Street.

Sherlock Holmes is a man out of his time, but he is also a figure of constant becoming, a man who fits in all times and no time both because in the end it's all the same. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson may not have gotten to fall in love before our eyes this time, but the wonderful thing about them, perhaps the very best thing, is that there will always be a next time. Whether it be in a fic that some fan is only now publishing or in a screenplay that's in turnaround or a blockbuster film or even another

season of *Sherlock*, perhaps there will come a time when the queer reading of these characters will not be 'too much,' when the representation will matter. If Sherlock Holmes could imagine a world full of telephones and text messages and nicotine patches and blogs, then those of us for whom the character matters can continue to imagine, too.

## Chapter 3

### The Show Must Go On:

#### Queerbaiting, Convergence, and The *Supernatural* Phenomenon

*“I want you to get out there, and I want you to stand as close as she wants you to, and I want you to put as much sub into that text as you possibly can.”*

*– Dean Winchester*

#### *Supernatural 10.5: Fan Fiction*

“And a million fanfic writers cried out in joy”<sup>43</sup>

Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) stands in a dimly lit barn, the dingy clapboard of the walls behind him painted with strange, complex symbols. He’s handsome and blunt, square shouldered and sharp-jawed, dressed in the workmanlike flannel, jeans, and boots that will become a uniform oft-seen at fan conventions and on cosplay Tumblr blogs. He stands at attention, on high alert, as the wind outside this meager shelter begins to howl and the shingles on the roof begin to bang an urgent heartbeat tattoo. A flash of

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<sup>43</sup> This quotation comes from one of the several fan-produced series recap videos that were made in the lead up to *Supernatural*’s 15th season, and the narrator who speaks it is in fact alluding to this scene when he says it (Cinematica 2019).

lightning illuminates the barn as Dean braces to fight, green eyes wary of whatever monster it is whose awesome and dangerous power he is witnessing.

The heavily-barricaded barn doors break open of their own accord before the man who enters: not some hulking, slavering beast but a seemingly unremarkable guy, dark haired and unassuming and dressed like “a holy tax accountant” in the white shirt, blue tie, and rumpled khaki trench coat that will come to be as instantly recognizable as Dean’s Monster Hunter Chic. He approaches Dean, walking directly across the barn, moving easily, unintimidated, vivid blue eyes direct and expression blank.

Sparks fly.

No, literally. The naked light of the dim bulbs explodes with the shrieking of broken glass as the barn illuminates in brilliant showers of bright white fire. The man, unbothered, strides purposefully through the sparks and does not flinch, does not even react when Dean aims his shotgun and fires.

The rounds of rock salt<sup>44</sup> do not signify. The man keeps coming. Dean grips his knife purposefully as the man comes to stand before him, his posture relaxed, his demeanor unthreatening. Dean, wary, asks: “Who are you?”

The man, who is not a man at all but an actual, literal angel of God, responds to Dean with a voice like cigarette ash in a gravel lot, like the growl of asphalt beneath racing tires: “I am the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition.”

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<sup>44</sup> Rock salt rounds can destroy malevolent spirits and if you didn’t know that before I told you then you’d better buckle in, because we’re talking about *Supernatural* and ain’t no show ever done Lore™ like *Supernatural* did Lore™.

With this first meeting between monster hunter Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel begins the strange and singular trajectory of *Supernatural* from a perfectly respectable entry in the canon of monster-of-the-week cable shows into the sprawling, byzantine, recursive epic that it had become by late 2020 when the show aired its series finale. The longest-running genre television show in American history and second only in the world to the venerable institution of *Doctor Who*, *Supernatural* followed brothers Sam and Dean Winchester for fifteen seasons as they hunted monsters, battled gods, and regularly both caused and subverted apocalypses that seemed to compound like matryoshka dolls. There was the first one with the angels and demons. And then there were the Leviathan. And Abbadon. And the Darkness. And Satan from an alternate timeline. There's even an episode of *Supernatural* where Dean and Sam solve a mystery with the gang from *Scooby-Doo*, although that one isn't strictly-speaking about the end of the world.

By the time that *Supernatural* aired episode 15.20, "Carry On" on November 19, 2020, as the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic was reaching its nadir, the show that was pitched by creator Eric Kripke as a complete narrative arc spanning five seasons had carried on for fully three times the length of its original envisioned run. Seeking to replicate the 'monster of the week' format that had worked so well for *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the five year map that Kripke originally envisioned followed brothers Sam and Dean Winchester as they took up their father's quest for vengeance against the demon that murdered their mother. "This is *X-Files* meets *Route 66*," writes Kripke in his original pitch. "Two brothers cruising the dusty back roads [...] and battling the things that go bump in the night" (Highfill 2019). Traveling

from place to place in their 1967 Chevy Impala, the brothers would encounter new monsters and myths to contend with each week while still advancing an overarching narrative that would have “detailed Sam and Dean’s quest to avenge their mother’s death” and eventually “heroically overcom[e] the devil himself” (Elvy 2019).

Had the world remained generally as it was when the first episode aired in 2005, it is likely that the overarching story of *Supernatural* would have borne a much stronger resemblance to the pitch from whence it came. Instead, one subverted apocalypse yields another; villains become allies and friends become adversaries. Characters are killed off and brought back and sent hurtling through time and to alternate dimensions. Sam and Dean die upwards of 100 collective times, to say nothing of all the daring escapes from the jaws of (sometimes literal) Death that they manage over the course of the ten seasons that the series survived beyond its original expected conclusion. But by accident as much as design, *Supernatural* just happened to be the right show at the right time to become something much more complex and unexpected than even Kripke’s admittedly ambitious vision for it. “Our series [...] is an epic hero’s quest – across the United States,” Kripke writes. It’s “almost like a modern western, and our heroes are gunslingers. Or, as I like to call it– it’s *Star Wars* in Truck Stop America” (Kripke 2004). In the days before the economy of attention was quite so saturated with seemingly endless franchise-able iterations on the original *Star Wars* trilogy, this description evokes both the mythological scope and narrative specificity of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth: the road that *Supernatural* was to travel would lead the Winchesters through the hero’s journey.

“A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day,” Campbell writes, “into a region of supernatural wonder” (Campbell 1949). Sam Winchester is grudgingly

compelled by his older brother Dean to return to a life of monster hunting after their father goes missing while tracking an actual demon. “[F]abulous forces are there encountered,” like the vampires and ghosts, angels and demons of *Supernatural*’s monster-of-the-week format, “and a decisive victory is won.” In the case of Winchester, this was to have been through Kripke’s version of the Biblical apocalypse, wherein Sam and Dean would have been compelled to defeat the fallen angel Lucifer and his army of demons with the help of allies both mystical and mundane. “[T]he hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man,” although how this would have ultimately manifested for the Winchester brothers is likely known only to Kripke, who departed from *Supernatural* as showrunner after the series wrapped its fifth season as he had always intended to.

So what happened to the version of *Supernatural* that Kripke originally envisioned following his departure? Where is the narrative moment that knocked the show off of the well-worn, circular path of the hero’s journey and set it on its winding trail full of switchbacks and dead ends, ultimately ending both so close to and yet so far away from the original point of departure? What happened that caused *Supernatural* to become the longest-running genre television program in American history? What distinguishes this series from its monster-of-the-week predecessors, and why did it strike such a powerful and sustained chord with such a large and devoted audience? And, perhaps most consequential for my consideration of representation that matters, what happened over the course of 320 episodes to earn *Supernatural* the dubious honor of being among the most-frequently cited examples of media queerbaiting in the emerging history of the term?

## Bury Your Gays

Queerbaiting, as I have said elsewhere, is the producorial practice of deliberately leveraging the queer potentials that fans cathect in a given text, ostensibly in order to promote and prolong or intensify fannish investment while never intending to reify those potentials in any material way. It is the foreclosure of queer futures before those futures can materialize, often signified in common discourse by the desire for queer characters to get a happy ending to their stories. The term was coined<sup>45</sup> in the early 2010s by fans on the emerging microblogging platform Tumblr to critique the complex economies of investment and attention upon which all serialized narratives in the mainstream context rely, as well as on the perceived bad-faith cynicism of creators who capitalize on queer affect but stop short of granting their characters any kind of representation that matters. That is to say: queerbaiting is the point of rupture where the habituated fannish practice of reading too much into it becomes a commodity in and of itself and where the developing political imperative of good representation – queer characters with happy futures – is subordinated to the demands of the convergence culture industry. The concept of queerbaiting is, I will argue, the product of an economy of attention that did not exist when *Supernatural* premiered, but which the show helped to shape in fundamental ways.

And indeed, fans and critics alike are only now getting the opportunity to consider *Supernatural* as a complete document and to subsequently make meaning from the

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<sup>45</sup> Queerbaiting has been historically used as an analog to race-baiting, wherein powerful people and specifically politicians court the vote of a specific demographic without necessarily intending to represent their interests once elected. This usage has become generally obsolete, as in contemporary America we just call this practice ‘politics.’

ultimate – and that is a term that I use advisedly – canonical fates of Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel. There has been no shortage of both scholarly and journalistic criticism of *Supernatural*, to say nothing of the critical and theoretical labor indigenous to fandom, that has been published while the show was still on the air. However, though the show’s enduring popularity has kept the cultural conversation around it relatively fluid, endings always *fix*. It is, I contend, the fundamental difficulty with the question of representing the queer in a meaningful and material way: endings by their nature foreclose futures, and “[t]he future is queerness’s domain” (Muñoz 2009). Certainly the ending of *Supernatural* in November 2020 was met with vociferous accusations of queerbaiting from fans and critics alike. In the thriving secondary economy of online media criticism – a byproduct of the convergence culture industry to which I will direct my attention presently – headlines like “The Ending of Supernatural Has Queer Fans Extremely Pissed Off” and “Supernatural’s Destiel is Canon, But It Was a Queerbaiting Mess” proliferated in the wake of episode 15.18, which is aptly entitled “Despair” (Salem 2020; Cranz 2020).

In the show’s antepenultimate episode, Castiel and Dean are faced with another in a long line of life- and world- and universe-threatening adversaries, and Castiel sacrifices his own life in an effort to neutralize the threat. For reasons upon which it would be impossible to briefly elaborate, Castiel reveals that he has made a deal with a cosmic entity known as The Empty<sup>46</sup> which stipulates his death upon experiencing “a moment of

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<sup>46</sup> The Empty is a void of existential nothingness wherein individual consciousnesses can nevertheless remain coherent and cohesive, as evidenced by the fact that Cas had actually escaped from it once before (and does so again in innumerable fannish extrapolations). The fact that Cas stubbornly continues to signify beyond even the existential limitations of the storyworld speaks to the character’s endemic queerness. My

perfect happiness.” In a tearful confession to Dean, Cas explains: “I always wondered [...] what it could be, what my true happiness could even look like. I never found an answer. Because the one thing I want... it’s something that I know I can’t have. But [...] I think I know now: happiness isn’t in the having, it’s in just being. It’s in just saying it.” He proceeds to tell Dean that he loves him, and with this suspended moment of ‘just being’ summons forth The Empty to be consumed into non-existence in the existential void. Dean, stricken, sinks to the floor, never having uttered a word in response.

Even if Dean remains obdurately silent, *Supernatural*’s fandom would not be so obliging. In every corner of the social internet that had grown up from essentially nothing over the course of a technologically accelerated fifteen years, Castiel’s speech prompted a “period of increased engagement by fans” now known as ‘Destielgate’ (Fanlore 2022). *Supernatural* 15.18 aired on November 5, 2020, only two days into the chaos of the American presidential election and in the midst of one of the deadliest periods of the Coronavirus pandemic. Still, even at arguably the most emergent test of reproductive futurity of recent years, the queer excessivities of *Supernatural* and its fandom caused the show to trend worldwide, with plentiful memes and hashtags like #destieliscanon prompting confusion from those who were too concerned with the ongoing indexical apocalypses to bother with a fictional one. “Who is Destiel?” wondered Gargi Rawat, a journalist in Dehli, India. “And what is canon. And why is it trending with the Putin news.<sup>47</sup> So confused.”

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analysis here will, somewhat regrettably, focus mostly on Dean. Cas deserves his own chapter. Somewhere. Not here though.

<sup>47</sup> Oh yeah. One of the big memes of this notably chaotic period involved the (false) rumors that Vladimir Putin was stepping down as President of Russia. *Supernatural* fans on Twitter and Tumblr, having a gay old time, began to hypothesize that Putin was a Destiel shipper who had stepped down in protest of the

The energetic initial reaction to ‘Destielgate’ notwithstanding, the lack of a happy ending for Castiel, let alone for Dean and Castiel together, left *Supernatural* fans with decidedly mixed feelings. For some, Castiel’s tearful admission of his love for Dean was sufficient to retroactively validate their reading of the text, bringing that love out of the subtext and into the canon of the show. Wrote one Tumblr user: “being able to just say out loud that dean and cas were in love without people being like youre [sic] reading too much into the scenes, you just want them to be together so youre seeing it that way, why do they have to be gay why can’t they just be friends / the honest relief of everything is actually astounding.” For others, Castiel’s speech and subsequent sacrifice were emphatically not enough, and the accusation of queerbaiting with which the show had long been saddled gained new energy in the wake of Cas’s canonical love confession that still categorically precluded any kind of livable future for the angel and his hunter. “It was the fastest ‘Bury your gays’ we’ve ever seen,” said *Supernatural* fan Evan Tess Murray in an interview with *Insider*. Said fan Bry Conte, “Even if Cas were to survive, even if he got a happy gay ending, its still three episodes out of 320. That’s not representation.” Certainly not representation that matters.

In contradistinction to Castiel’s declaration that happiness is not a possession but a state of being, *Supernatural* fans and the secondary economies of popular media criticism for whom they are the target audience seem to (at the moment) have landed largely in the consensus that “the moment Castiel confessed his love to Dean was utter bullshit,” agreeing with Conte that the gesture was emphatically too little, too late, and

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show’s handling of the queer representation. Herein is another part of fandom wherein ecstatic feeling makes possible new kinds of queer imagination: shitposting.

with Murray on the violences intrinsic in the foreclosure of livable futures for queer characters in media. If the orienting temporal drive of the here-and-now is always inexorably toward the future, toward acquisition and progress and all the forward-dawning imperatives of straight time, then ‘positive representation’ and its implied happiness – for how can queer representation really matter if there is no happy ending?<sup>48</sup> – must be in the *having* – in the *seeing* – not merely in the being. However, in the ever-hopeful and defiant narrative rebellion so intrinsic to transformative fandom, a glut of new Destiel fics quickly appeared on Archive of Our Own with tags like ‘Castiel/Dean Winchester Happy Ending,’ ‘Better Than Canon,’ and the characteristically pointed ‘The happy ending Destiel and we deserved’ (Ao3 2023).

The idea that *Supernatural* fans might be *owed* a happy ending for these fictional characters speaks to the complex economies of attention between media fans and producers that, in the years between *Supernatural*’s premiere in 2005 to its finale in 2020, gave rise to what Suzanne Scott has called the convergence culture industry. Henry Jenkins’ concept of convergence culture refers to the cultural circumstances wherein “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins 2006). The term is itself co-emergent with the first season of *Supernatural*, and presciently predicts many of the dynamics that would emerge between the creative team and their fans during the show’s tenure. “Fans have always been early

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<sup>48</sup> Okay. Look. I’m not focused on the erotics of fanfiction in any concerted way in this dissertation – although I plan to develop this thread further in the eventual manuscript – but suffice it to say that Dean and Castiel get innumerable happy endings in the fanfiction that continues to resist the final conclusion of their stories.

adapters of new media technologies,” writes Jenkins, anticipating the thriving, rhizomatic networks of fannish affinity that would immediately find purchase on Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and in every corner of the social internet. “[T]heir fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production,” as would become apparent with the development of both specialized and generalized fanfiction archives that increased the accessibility of such transformative fan writing for both writers and readers alike, and began to work as hubs of fannish connection in their own right. LiveJournal, Tumblr, and Fanfiction.net all facilitated connections between geographically diverse populations of fans who immediately began to write and read and share and extrapolate, collectively indulging in the pleasures of excessive reading on a scale previously unprecedented, although not particularly unsurprising for scholars of fandom and its practices. After all, “[f]ans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants. None of this is new. What has shifted is the visibility of fan culture. The Web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production” (Jenkins 2006).

And to be sure, amateur cultural production existed around *Supernatural* from the very beginning, but Dean’s emerging relationship with Castiel throughout the show’s fourth season precipitated an astronomical increase in visible – and therefore potentially exploitable – fannish investment. It was the focus of that investment – and the assumptive identities of those invested – that proved so consistently problematic and fractious for relations between *Supernatural*’s producers – including the three showrunners who followed Kripke – and their fans. The question of what kind of fannish investment is

monetizable and therefore acceptable within the convergence culture industry has everything to do with the binary logics of emotion/cognition that I have discussed elsewhere in relation to Sherlock Holmes. In her complication of Jenkins' original concept, Suzanne Scott explains the 'convergence culture *industry*' as "an analytic to interrogate how industrial efforts to standardize the cultural category of 'fan' have exacerbated longstanding gendered tensions within fan culture" (Scott 2019). Particular kinds of fannish attachment, specifically those that can be easily interpolated into consumer capitalism, have been not only sanctioned by producerial powers but relied upon as integral components of the creative economies that yield fannish content. Typically, these have been "male fans and historically masculinized fan practices," while "the transformative impulses of female fans" are considered "renegade," unacceptable, excessive. Too much.

The question of transformative fandom as itself an intrinsic part of the convergence culture industry has everything to do with representation, matter, and representation that matters. While Scott perfectly illustrates the development of the convergence culture industry as "a gendered politics of participation that is designed to privilege male fans and their preferred modes of participation," I am interested here in considering the question of queerbaiting as a strategy by which the convergence culture industry has attempted to capitalize on the transformative investments of female and queer fans. I do not necessarily suggest that the practice emerged in any malicious or premeditated way from a nefarious media industry intent upon the (admittedly creative) psychological torture of naive, impressionable, or excessively horny (?) genre media fans. Such a narrative (while gratifyingly sympathetic – if somewhat condescending – to those

most likely to embrace it) gives both fans and producers somehow too much and too little credit at the same time.

As (rather endearingly) demonstrated in Kripke's initial pitch, media storytellers are almost invariably also media fans. This is a premise that I have not stated explicitly before, but which merits a moment of emphasis. The entire argument that I am developing here around excessive reading is predicated upon the premise that media fans are media storytellers – otherwise the very concept of fanfiction would not exist. It should follow then, in a reciprocal if qualified way, that those storytellers who have managed to produce an original concept that finds commercial success were media fans first, with attachments and enthusiasms like any other.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, media fans who “insist [...] upon the right to become full participants” by reading too much into a given text are often well-versed in narrative tropes and structures, conversant in production and economic logistics, and highly attuned to the themes and aesthetics of their chosen text(s), as demonstrated – as I have described in Chapter 1– by *The Johnlock Conspiracy* (TJLC). If, as Jenkins' suggests, the emergence of the social internet has the potential to function as an equalizing force between creator and audience, then I will indeed assume that they are equal. If not equal in power or influence (and I will get to that) then at least in their ability to think critically, read/write with intention, and respond to shifting economic, sociopolitical, and creative dynamics in the interest of their own priorities.

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<sup>49</sup> While I could elaborate more here about the precise nature of those qualifications as related to the gendered, racist, and ableist structures of any number of media industries, others have done so more eloquently and at greater length than I can within the scope of this chapter. *Supernatural* is egregiously and kind of unrepentantly a 'white dude show' on every level from casting to direction to best boy key grip, and the masculinized assumption of universal experience is relevant to Scott's argument about the marginalization of 'feminine' fan practices within the convergence culture industry. And so, let us take the breathtaking privilege of such broad statements as read forthwith.

Queerbaiting is the point at which these priorities come into seemingly irreconcilable friction – where they converge – and therefore must be considered with those conflicting economic, sociopolitical, and creative preoccupations top of mind.

As the dynamics of the social internet began to coalesce, as social media and smartphones and asynchronous viewing opened cracks in the very foundations of social time, *Supernatural* happened to be perfectly placed in time and circumstance to withstand the tectonic shifting of the mediated landscape and to bridge the chasm that was opening up in “the history of US television as it now morph[ed] into digital TV” (Villarejo 2014). It is no accident that *Supernatural* should have become the ur-text of the convergence culture industry, as I will contend that it has. It is, after all, a text that takes the apocalypse as its subject, and which itself emerged as a consequence of the end of the world.<sup>50</sup> Or, perhaps, rather, the end of *a* world: the media economy of American cable television – and its underlying sociotemporal logics – for and through which *Supernatural* had originally been conceived.

The contemporary cultures, practices, and economies of media fandom to which we are habituated in 2023 did not yet exist when *Supernatural* premiered, and were still in their earliest infancies when Castiel gripped Dean tight and raised him from perdition three years later. For context, Facebook did not begin allowing open membership until 2006, the same year in which Twitter was unleashed upon an unsuspecting public. Netflix did not begin streaming content online until 2007– the same year that saw the launch of a humble microblogging platform called Tumblr– and did not commit to the model

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<sup>50</sup> Hell, *Supernatural*'s inaugural foray into an apocalyptic alternate reality puts the end of the world due to a global pandemic in 2012, so at least we held out longer than those chumps.

exclusively until 2011, almost two years after the Organization for Transformative Works launched Archive of Our Own in November of 2009. Hell, *Supernatural* even predates YouTube by a few months, as the site was only in beta until its official launch on December 15, 2005. Essentially *none* of the most important social, political, and temporal mechanisms that eventually helped turn *Supernatural* into a global phenomenon that could supersede news of an attempted coup d'état *pre-exist* the show.

Much of my discussion in this chapter will consider the initial and emerging temporalities at work in *Supernatural* that have yielded such far-reaching accusations of queerbaiting as the show has withstood. I do not care to speculate on the precise nature of the behind-the-scenes creative and economic decisions that brought *Supernatural* to its eventual conclusion, and cannot pretend any deeper insight into the thoughts or intentions – malicious, cynical, sincere, or otherwise – of any of the creative team. Where they have commented publicly, I have considered their statements, but I do so with the understanding that the showrunners, actors, writers, and crew of *Supernatural* were building the plane as they were flying it in some pretty crucial ways. It bears repeating that the ultimate trajectory of the show would have been almost entirely impossible to predict at that point in late 2008, either for fans or for the show's production team. From the vantage point of 2023 and with the benefit of post-finale hindsight, the significance of *Supernatural* within the historical moment that I am outlining here cannot be underestimated. And yet, for all that Kripke's imagined arc would have certainly been built along the epic lines of the Campbellian monomyth, the hero's journey is not nearly as complex, not nearly as messy, not nearly as *queer* as *Supernatural* would become over

the course of the eleven seasons that feature the angel Castiel and his relationship with Dean Winchester.

I contend that the accusations of queerbaiting that have been leveled at *Supernatural* and other genre media of roughly the same vintage are a consequence of the friction that occurs between the still-evolving negotiation of media representation, of how and why it matters, and the practices of queer subtextual reading to which fans have long been habituated. *Supernatural* is, in my estimation, a landmark text of the convergence culture industry as it was beginning to emerge in the popular media landscape of 2005, and which developed so rapidly as to entirely change that landscape by 2020. A portmanteau of Henry Jenkins' figuration of 'convergence culture' and Adorno's 'culture industry,' Suzanne Scott's concept considers the "the growing centrality of fans' place within the creative industries and media fans' increasing unwillingness to accept the culture industries as they are" (Scott 2019). The emergence of the queerbaiting discourse over the course of *Supernatural*'s tenure is a consequence of precisely this unwillingness, as media fans who were invested in queer possibilities began to find language for the temporal and representational contestations from whence queer utopian feeling emerge.

*Supernatural*, in short, *invented* queerbaiting. Or rather, more generously, the phenomenon of queerbaiting is co-emergent with the convergence culture industry and with this show that is unambiguously in its vanguard. The burgeoning power of the convergence culture industry was quickly bringing seismic changes to the media landscape into which *Supernatural* first premiered on September 13, 2005, and the world into which the show aired its conclusion would be nigh unrecognizable as a result. *Supernatural* teetered on the precipice of an apocalypse of sorts that even Sam and Dean

Winchester could not prevent or circumvent. The very foundations of media viewership, to say nothing of participatory fandom, its practices and its spaces, were to undergo tectonic shifts before *Supernatural* reached its ultimate conclusion, shifts that were in fact enormously consequential for the trajectory of the show and for its legacy in the history of media fandom.

### The Road So Far

As *Supernatural* outlived its original ending and persisted into ever more strange and convoluted narrative temporalities, maintaining the continuity for viewers from week to week became of paramount importance. Throughout each season of *Supernatural*, individual episodes might begin with a short recap of scenes from previous episodes “that serve[d] to get the viewer up to speed on the parts of the arc relevant to the episode in question,” while premieres, finales, and returns from the mid-season hiatus featured a souped-up version of this ‘Previously On...’ montage (Fanlore 2022). Appropriate to Kripke’s fascination with the “highways and byways of supernatural America,” this segment is entitled ‘The Road So Far.’ I will discuss the centrality of serialization to *Supernatural*’s development in a later section of this chapter, and for now only allude to the format of the recap in order to emulate the convention.

If the decisive point of queer temporal rupture that I locate in *Supernatural* emerges with the introduction of Castiel and his “profound bond” with Dean, then it is useful to consider the temporal logics inherent to the show prior to his appearance. What would *Supernatural* have been had the show’s narrative possibilities remained as they

were in Kripke's speculative treatment? The document is replete with references to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, and the cyclical logics of the monomyth are evident everywhere in his explanation of the show's premise. "EVERY road trip story," Kripke writes, "from FEAR and LOATHING to Kerouac to The Odyssey, are inherently mythic quests, hero's journeys, real Joseph Campbell stuff" (Kripke 2004).<sup>51</sup> The Hero's Journey had long been a safe narrative bet for media storytellers seeking mainstream success, as evidenced by the highly referential nature of Kripke's explanation: "the way STAR WARS, LORD OF THE RINGS, and MATRIX are all the same story, with the same beats. So our series, too, is an epic hero's quest – across the United States." There is a fascination evident in Kripke's writing, not only with "the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" that Campbell locates in the monomyth, but with how this seemingly universal impulse for meaning-making might be applied in the context of the mythic 'America' in which Kripke is evidently invested.

The repeated emphasis on the show's geographical and cultural context is not incidental. Indeed, the myth of 'America' is perhaps the central conceit upon which *Supernatural* is predicated. "There are dark and dangerous things out there in the corners of our country," Kripke observes. "So here's a show that travels the diverse highways and byways of supernatural America. [...] Really, a show ABOUT our country – the bloody, beating heart of America" (Kripke 2004). Kripke's vision for his hero's journey is about the "youthful electricity of dropping out and hitting the open road: the freedom of wide

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<sup>51</sup> So significant was the monomyth to Kripke's original vision for the Winchester brothers that it is revealed in a later season that Sam and Dean's mother's maiden name was Mary Campbell.

open American spaces,” and his main characters reflect the fallacy of universal experience that undergirds both Campbell’s monomythic hypothesis and the carefully-curated romance of the American political project (Kripke 2004).

Although his heroes’ orientation to hegemonic norms is well outside of Kripke’s consideration in his pitch, the fact remains that the Winchester brothers are both white, cisgender, (assumptively) heterosexual men. They could not be otherwise, in fact, if Sam and Dean were indeed to find their place alongside Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, and Jack Kerouac’s Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, after whom the brothers are named.<sup>52</sup> Of the purported thousand faces attributed to Joseph Campbell’s monomythical hero, it seems that the preponderance of those faces have belonged to white men; a remarkable coincidence that could have nothing at all to do with Campbell’s own particular preoccupations or with the hegemonic norms that the hero’s journey conveniently reifies. In her excellent exegesis of the scholarly criticisms of Campbell, Glenda Hambly summarizes the argument thusly:

Campbell interpreted myths from the sociopolitical-cultural viewpoint of a mid-twentieth-century, White, male American. [...] His eccentric and partisan interpretation of history, belief in the value of the individual over ‘mass society’ – so strong in the West in the 1950s as the threat of Communism grew – and his sincere belief in the central heroic theme of America based on the individual and

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<sup>52</sup> Kerouac apocryphally took his inspiration for Dean Moriarty’s surname from Sherlock Holmes’ nemesis, Professor James Moriarty. *Supernatural* has come to be closely associated with the BBC’s *Sherlock* through an explosion of the superfandom known as SuperWhoLock on Tumblr. The indeterminacy and opportunism of transmedia storytelling is, to use the technical phrase, queer as fuck.

self-achievement – can all be seen as influences shaping his monomyth theory (Hambly 2021).

Swap out ‘mid-twentieth century’ for ‘early twenty-first’ and ‘threat of Communism’ for ‘the ongoing reverberations of 9/11’ in this critique and it could have easily been written about Eric Kripke, as evidenced by the sweeping mythic scope and language that he employs in his pitch. The “freedom of wide open American spaces” with which Kripke is enamored speaks to the assumption of unquestioned access, a power that has been historically curtailed for everyone but white men within the sociopolitical logics of the fabled Land of Opportunity. For the structure of *Supernatural* to work, Sam and Dean must be able to move through the world with impunity, passing unnoticed and unremarked upon from town to town across the United States. They have no need for *The Negro Motorist Green Book* to warn them away from sundown towns, no hesitation about hustling pool in seedy roadside bars for fear of retaliatory racist violence. Dean can accept shots of whisky from strangers at those same dives without stopping to wonder if his drink has been drugged; Sam can go running in the dark. The Winchesters can impersonate federal agents as their means of gaining access to the privileged particulars of whichever case they are investigating – a gambit that relies wholly upon the intrinsic innocuousness and assumptive power of their white (cis)masculinity.<sup>53</sup> In short, in order for Sam and Dean to come to grips with “the dark and dangerous things out there in the

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<sup>53</sup> The ever-fluid language and practice of transness is well and truly outside of *Supernatural*’s lane, as the show relies upon an almost parodic delineation of gender roles most of the time – like straight man drag. Angels and demons frequently possess human ‘vessels’ that may vary in gender, but there were never any canonically-acknowledged trans characters included on the show. However, I would very much recommend searching Ao3 for the tag ‘Trans Dean Winchester’ if you want to know what people have done to further complicate the narrative of authentic working class masculinity upon which the show relies so heavily.

corners of our country,” the violences intrinsic to the country itself cannot be dangerous to *them*. For Sam and Dean Winchester, America actually is The Land of the Free and Home of the Brave.<sup>54</sup>

Myth-making is, after all, the “bloody, beating heart of America,” although not precisely in the way that Kripke means it in his pitch. The mythical freedom to “hit the open road” reverberates with echoes of Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century expansionist doctrine that extended American influence from sea to shining sea. The core premise of the show — that monsters are real and must be eradicated for the sanctity of the common good — is the same foundation from which emerges the xenophobia inherent in the American political project.<sup>55</sup> It is the ideological assumption through which the myth of some essential American experience gains its coherence. Who counts as a monster and what is within the interests of the common good are more malleable and opportunistic concepts, but the suppression of difference and dissent in the name of some abstract concept of ‘America’ is as old as – older than – the country itself. In historicizing the show within the context of the post-9/11 televisual landscape, Brian Ireland observes that “in its depiction of women, its attitude to race and its portrayal of religion, *Supernatural* is unreflectively conservative, often making hegemonic assertions about conservative

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<sup>54</sup> And even then, it’s actually Canada. The show’s principal production has always been based in Vancouver, B.C.

<sup>55</sup> It is not surprising that many of the ‘monsters’ to which Dean and Sam address their eradictory violence come from the folklore of non-Western cultures, and even less surprising that figures from North American indigenous cosmologies often meet with particularly nasty ends. As Hambly observes in her critique of the monomyth, “understanding the cultural context of mythical narrative is crucial in explaining its origin and purpose because myths do not arise in a historical or cultural vacuum” (Hambly 2021). From within a cultural context wherein their identities make them conveniently invisible and unquestionably righteous, Kripke – and by extension the Winchester brothers – fundamentally misunderstand the context and purpose of creatures like the windigo and the bainne sidhe for the cultures and societies that created them.

cultural norms” that reinforce the status quo of whiteness and maleness from which Sam and Dean benefit. *Supernatural*’s moral cosmology relies upon an “overarching theme of entropy — holding the line against forces of chaos and disorder to protect the ‘American way’ against those who seek to disrupt or subvert it” (Ireland 2017). And if the freedom of the road is, as Kripke suggests, uniquely emblematic of that mythic ‘American way,’ then the only unimpeded access to the true American experience comes through white masculinity masquerading as the ‘universal human experience.’

And certainly much has been written in particular about what Donald Earl Collins has called the “White-Boy Logic” of *Supernatural*. He observes that the ‘job’ of hunting monsters, which is so frequently conflated in the show’s diegesis with the notion of ‘saving the world,’ “involves hustling pool tables, identity theft and hacking credit cards, stealing cars, and regularly killing people who’ve turned into monsters or in the midst of demon possession. Any two of these gets Black and Brown and Indigenous<sup>56</sup> folks a one-way ticket to prison or a grave, with no chance for resurrection” (Collins 2021). The preemptive presumption of malicious intent on the part of Black, indigenous, and people of color – of monstrosity, one could say – is fundamental to the interior logics of American white supremacy, as is borne out again and again in both film and in the lived reality of BIPOC Americans. From *Birth of a Nation* to the phone and police body-cam

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<sup>56</sup> For a show that relies so heavily upon the appropriation of the folklore of Turtle Island (often in shockingly reductive and misrepresentative ways), *Supernatural* boasts notably few storylines that centralize the voices of indigenous people themselves. Though the show makes liberal use of windigos and skinwalkers and a particularly wild interpretation of the mystery of the Roanoke colony, Sam and Dean never even encounter the ghost of a slain warrior or chieftain, to say nothing of their contemporary counterparts. This is particularly odd, considering that, in the words of noted hauntological philosopher Trixie Mattel: “If ghosts are dead people who are pissed in America, all those ghosts are Native Americans” (Still Watching Netflix 2020).

footage that has marked the end of an unconscionable number of innocent lives, it is not as though men molded so rigidly within the logics of American patriarchy have always been as pure of intention as Sam and Dean are meant to be when they unilaterally ascribe and eradicate monstrosity from week to week and town to town.

As Ireland notes, the show is the product of the particularly virulent period of xenophobia and racism masquerading as and justified by the jingoistic ‘patriotism’ that emerged with flying these-colors-don’t-run<sup>57</sup> in the years immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. During the years between 2000-2009 (a span of time during which the first five seasons of *Supernatural* were written, produced, and aired) “the percentage of hate crime incidents directed towards Muslims increased by over 500 percent,” with tacit endorsement from the Bush administration in its “‘Special Registration’ requirement that all males from a list of Arab and Muslim countries report to the government to register and be fingerprinted” (Watson Institute 2021). The obvious and chilling analogs here to marauding posses of slave catchers and boarding schools for indigenous children and the Japanese internment camps of World War II lend credence to the notion that – much more than the roadside kitsch and classic cars with which *Supernatural* is so fascinated – the idea that incipient evil can be easily located, identified, and eradicated without due process of law is as American as Dean Winchester’s beloved apple pie. And such unexamined logics are everywhere in

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<sup>57</sup> It feels strange to attempt to explain or define this statement that has been ubiquitously painted on the sides of garages and stickered onto trucks’ rear windows since I was in the seventh grade. My first recollection of seeing this repudiation of terrorism is inextricably entangled with my other vivid memories of 9/11, but historian Steve Hahn “thinks that the phrase’s origin comes from a 1960s critique of draft resisters who fled out of the U.S.,” although it has also come to be associated with “the idea that the colors of the flag don’t run in the face of a challenge: The U.S. doesn’t run from necessary wars.” Or, since we’re talking about the multitude of disastrous 9/11 afterlives, ruinously unnecessary ones either (Brown 2017).

*Supernatural*, reflecting and illuminating the horrors of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, of enhanced interrogation and extraordinary rendition and justifiable preemptive strikes. The show takes for granted that the Winchester brothers' intentions are generally righteous, even as they enact unspeakable and wide-ranging violence against hundreds of villains, victims, and bystanders alike, all in the service of 'saving people, hunting things, the family business.'

In the name of protecting a livable future for those who manage to avoid or survive their help by killing monsters<sup>58</sup> and stopping the apocalypse, the Winchesters habitually relegate those with whom they do come in contact to the temporal prison of the past. The epic scope of Kripke's vision is of course indebted to both the temporal determinism of the Campbellian monomyth and the apocalyptic eschatology of the Biblical book of Revelations, but Sam and Dean's command of and right to determine the future is made evident in countless granular ways as well. It's there in the very notion of a *hunter*: one who identifies, tracks, pursues, and kills. The plot of essentially every episode of the first several seasons sees the Winchester brothers ending some particular world in order to protect the larger one. Sometimes the world being ended belongs to an unambiguously evil inhuman monstrosity, but more often there are human lives and human costs to which the show attends mostly through their psycho-emotional impact on Sam and Dean. This, too, is baked into the show's future-oriented focus on the

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<sup>58</sup> There is more to say about the question of queerness and monstrosity, as I will explore in my analysis of Castiel's first appearance. For now, I will only quote Susan Stryker, who states the case for embracing monstrosity as an identity worthy of a liveable future (rather than unregulated annihilation by a 7-foot tall hair model and his brother the John Wayne cosplayer) more eloquently than I could summarize: "I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living" (Stryker 1994).

Winchester brothers that requires all those who do not occupy relatively the same cultural positioning of working class American masculinity be defined entirely in the context of their pasts.

Example *par excellence*: the show's very first episode contains not one but two unambiguous 'fridgings,' wherein the violent and tragic death of a female character is used as a means of motivation and emotional development for the male characters around her. Neither Dean and Sam's mother, Mary,<sup>59</sup> nor Sam's fiancée Jessica makes it past the show's pilot, establishing a norm in *Supernatural* that women are relevant primarily as victims and therefore inextricably defined by and through the past – especially their past significance to any of the Winchester men.<sup>60</sup> Ellen Harvelle and her daughter Jo are hunters who meet a violent and bloody end when they choose to stand with the Winchesters against the forces of Hell, although not before Jo shares a brief romantically-inflected friendship with Dean that makes her death particularly bittersweet and exceptionally good for generating the "boy melodrama" that in turn provides the central emotional thrust of *Supernatural*'s plot (Thompson 2014). Kripke must bear much of the blame for this distasteful habit, although the show occasionally continued to pull out the fridge even after he had departed as showrunner. The vociferously lamented Charlie Bradbury, the lesbian tech genius played by Felicia Day, is only one notable example of

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<sup>59</sup> Mary Winchester bears the dubious honor of having been fridged in the show's pilot and then killed *again* to benefit the emotional development of her sons in *Supernatural*'s 12th season after she is resurrected as a gift for Dean by a cosmic entity known as Amara (or to use her death metal stage name: The Darkness). Ah yes, the ol' Dead Mom gamut: the harmful and reductive sexist trope so nice they used it twice.

<sup>60</sup> Though 'Winchester men' may start out as a very literal designation applying only to John Winchester and his sons, the moniker in time comes to include other working class white men like Bobby Singer as well as multidimensional wavelengths of celestial intent in working class white men 'meat suits,' like Castiel.

*Supernatural*'s ongoing propensity to sideline characters who are not white, male and/or (assumptively) straight, often in violent and tragic ways. Their deaths have the dual effects of restraining them in a state of perpetual victimhood and providing compelling character development as Sam and Dean move inexorably into a future that is always assumed to be their right, even as they confine so many to the past through their actions in preemptively protecting it.

In many ways, the coherence of the Winchester brothers' future relies upon the exclusion of anyone for whom the 'America' of the show's idealized imagination does not already exist within the sociopolitical structures of the indexical country that *Supernatural* seeks to reflect. Even if the show had ended with season five as Kripke intended, all of the brutal exclusionary temporal logics of whiteness, American-ness, and masculinity would still be baked into the core premise. It is not my wish or intention to excuse or elide the very real violences of white supremacy and misogyny that are intrinsic to *Supernatural*'s foundational composition, nor to merely signpost these violences in order to qualify my argument about what I believe are the show's more interesting and potentially more liberatory queer potentials. On the contrary, the fact that "the freedom of wide open American spaces" to which the Winchester brothers have such broad access includes the space of the *future* – the ever-retreating horizon at the end of the dusty road – is fundamental to my argument here. Like the other avatars of queer futurity that I examine in this project, Dean's whiteness and his masculinity are part of what makes him such an hospitable vector for imagining livable futures from inside the reductive and determinist logics of linear-progressive narrative time. Dean's unquestioned access and assumptive *right* to a future, borne precisely *of* his sociopolitical

identities, makes him an exceptional character through whom to practice excessive reading.

### No Homo, Bro(ther)

The introduction of Castiel to the narrative in the show's fourth season is, as I will discuss, the catalyst for Dean's conclusive transformation into an avatar of queer futurity so strong that he defied the narrative imperative of ending both inside the show's storyworld and beyond it. However, it is in his relationship to his brother where Dean's incipient queerness first begins to develop and wherein the temporal forces of queer futurity that Dean embodies begins to coalesce. From the inciting incident to the show's final shot, *Supernatural* is *fundamentally about* the homosocial relationship between brothers Sam and Dean Winchester. While the week-to-week narrative thrust of *Supernatural* may rely upon the familiar beats of the investigative procedural, the show's emotional bedrock is the familial bond of love and obligation that both unites Sam and Dean in their weekly hunts and, increasingly, provides the melodramatic emotional thrust of the series' more epic aspirations during what fans now refer to as 'The Kripke Era' and beyond.

As the stakes become ever more cosmic with the introduction of angels and demons and the biblical Apocalypse, Sam and Dean are brought together and torn apart from each other over and over again as they are swept up in the machinations of Heaven and Hell. Their iteration of the hero's journey is as much about a return to each other as it is about a return to some elusive everyday world that has been lost to the brothers for

years by the time they are introduced in the pilot. Though Sam and Dean operate and develop independently throughout the series, each hitting different iterations of the same beat of the narrative drum of the monomyth, they are – like Cain and Abel or Jacob and Esau or any number of Biblical pairs of brothers – always invariably linked together like twin stars around which the show’s narrative system coalesces and maintains coherence.

But as much as Sam and Dean’s story is beholden to the epic melodramatic tradition of fraternal tragedy that creates an absolutely unassailable homosocial bond between the two, its early seasons are just as indebted – if not moreso – to the archetypes of Campbell’s monomyth. In Kripke’s pitch, Sam is envisioned as “the Luke Skywalker of the series[:] smart, funny, handsome, maybe a little type-A.” When he is introduced in the pilot, he has managed to escape from the violence and dysfunction of his upbringing on the road with older brother Dean and their distant, domineering father John. Sam is now a successful law student who has built a ‘normal’ life for himself with his fiancée Jessica and is effectively estranged from his father and brother when the series opens. Sam is written as the audience surrogate through whom we are introduced to the strange, dangerous, and unpredictable world of monster hunting of which his brother Dean is still very much a part. He is initially situated as the hero figure who must leave the ordinary world and reenter this hidden realm of myths and monsters that seethes just below the safety and upwardly-mobile normality of the life to which he has escaped. Sam is successful, well-adjusted, committed to his fiancée and intent on his future of white collar, monogamous bliss. He’s studious and cautious, thoughtful and goal-oriented. He is, to put it bluntly, the ‘straight man,’ in essentially every connotation of that remarkably malleable phrase.

“If Sam’s the good kid, Dean’s the troublemaker,” Kripke’s pitch continues. “If Sam’s Luke Skywalker, Dean’s Han Solo” (Kripke 2004). And like Han Solo, Dean is the pirate to Sam’s hero. He’s brash and uncouth where Sam is studied and refined, happy to subsist on burgers and beer where Sam’s preference for healthier choices becomes something of a running joke. He lives out of his car and in various anonymous fleabag motels, hustling pool and committing credit card fraud and killing monsters on his distant father’s orders, all in hopes of finding the yellow-eyed demon who murdered Mary Winchester when Dean was four and Sam a babe in arms. Dean’s “cocky confidence mask[s] a troubled soul,” his desperate need for his father’s approval warring with his resentment over Sam’s abandonment and his deep and almost parental regard for his younger brother. If the Sam of the pilot is introduced as the Campbellian hero, then Dean is his call to adventure, appearing in the middle of the night to raid Sam’s fridge and hit on his girlfriend before insisting that Sam abandon his hard-won life to aid Dean in his mission to rescue their shitty, neglectful dad.

In true monomythical fashion, Sam at first refuses the call. But when Jessica dies in the same singular violent manner as Sam and Dean’s mother, a brokenhearted Sam agrees to join his brother on the road, although he insists that the situation is temporary and that he will leave again once John’s mysterious disappearance has been resolved. Of course, once the brothers begin to follow the clues that will lead them to finding their father, Sam is dragged ever-further from the ‘normal’ life in which he had been so invested and back into the hard and dangerous work of “saving people, hunting things: the family business.” Dean’s orientation to Campbellian heroism is more ambiguous and ill-defined from the outset, as his journey from the everyday world and into the special

world is less stark and clearly-defined than Sam's. The revelation that demons exist late in season one might reasonably serve as Dean's initiation into the special world, as this is the point at which the show begins to come to grips with the biblical proportions of its ultimate stakes, but Dean is more temporally unruly than his brother from the jump and only gets more queerly oriented to the proscriptive edicts of the hero's journey as the story progresses.

In fact, Dean exhibits all of the characteristics that I have ascribed to the avatar of queer futurity from the first episode of *Supernatural*. If Sam is the straight man – the Felix in the Winchesters' odd couple dynamic – then Dean, as his Oscar and narrative antipode, is *necessarily* anything other than straight. While the Sam of the pilot has wrested himself free of the cyclical life of hunting in pursuit of a future that is different from his past, Dean is trapped in a perpetual adolescence of devoted filial duty to his embittered father, caught up in an inherited cycle of vengeance and death that has little hope of resolution. Though Dean was only four at the time of their mother's violent death, he is old enough to remember a happier life before John embarked upon his decades-long quest to kill the demon who murdered his wife, where Sam remembers only the unhappy, transient childhood that followed his mother's death. If Sam is temporally oriented toward a prosperous future, then Dean is consistently defined in terms of the trauma in his past. His relationship to linear-progressive time is at the very least unruly, as a child who had no choice but to grow up too soon and a grown man with the tastes and habits of a particularly rowdy adolescent. His regard for Sam's well-being is complete, but he acts with such reckless abandon that he seems to have no belief or investment in his own future.

Just as he is queerly oriented to the imagined future of Sam's normative aspirations, Dean is inherently excessive to the show's established image of normality. He is scornful of the possibilities inherent in Sam's borrowed season of white collar monogamy, eschewing what he calls the 'apple pie life' in favor of the freedom and lawlessness of his drifter's existence. Certainly much has been made of Jensen Ackles performance as Dean, whose John Wayne swagger and James Dean face coupled with the gruff baritone that Ackles adopts coalesce into such a textbook example of white, working class American masculinity that it not infrequently crosses over into camp. Jared Padalecki's Sam is more reserved, more erudite, more fastidious and health-conscious than his brother. His 6'4" stature and athletic frame add an ironic charm to his status as *Supernatural's* resident 'nerd,' but Sam's upwardly-mobile aspirations and Stanford education nevertheless set him at frequent odds with Dean's often toxic standards for appropriate masculinity.

Dean is a womanizer, a drinker, a fighter and carouser who has no real use for formal education but whose many years at the school of hard knocks have given him preternatural skill at surviving in liminal spaces. He is a creature of fleabag motels and anonymous dive bars, most at home speeding down a back road behind the wheel of his lovingly maintained classic Chevy Impala, with which he has his most consistently healthy emotional relationship of the show.<sup>61</sup> He drinks too much and sleeps too little and moves through the world with a kind of violent moral ferocity whereby he can save the world for 'normal' people but never sustainably inhabit that world for himself. Dean is

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<sup>61</sup> Can you have a healthy emotional relationship with a car? That seems like an oxymoron, kinda.

excessive. He is too much. He does not fit easily within the linear narrative of the hero's journey for which Sam is so well-suited, but only gains coherence through that narrative lens through the hugely consequential homosocial bond that he shares with his brother.

The homosocial relationship between Sam and Dean is, and remains, *Supernatural's* most narratively consequential element. Indeed, the show actively *teaches* viewers to invest in the story with the brothers' relationship as a central priority. In discussing the narrative construction of what he calls "the lesbian narrative" of sitcoms like *Laverne & Shirley* and *I Love Lucy*, Alexander Doty contends that these shows "encourage, and in many ways position, audiences to read and enjoy queerly" by "constructing narratives that connect an audience's pleasure to the activities and relationships of women – which results in situating most male characters as potential threats to the spectator's narrative pleasure" (Doty 1993). Doty is not suggesting that these programs are intentionally evoking any deep sapphic yearning between the characters of Laverne and Shirley or Lucy and Ethel, but rather illustrating the ways in which the structure of these sitcoms teach viewers that the greatest narrative rewards will invariably come from the dynamic connection between the women at their center. It's not necessary to 'ship' Laverne and Shirley romantically in order to acknowledge that their connection is the heart and soul of the show, or to root against any narrative forces that might irrevocably alter the narrative conditions through which their dynamic coheres.

In much the same way, *Supernatural* relies upon the bonds of brotherly love between the Winchesters for its fundamental narrative animus. There is a cyclicity to this dynamic of the show's temporal schema wherein circumstances bring Sam and Dean together and then put them at odds only for their lives – and the fate of the world – to

depend upon their reconciliation. Quite apart from the charm of their odd couple personalities and the chemistry between Ackles and Padalecki that make their dynamic so compelling, Sam and Dean's fraternal connection adds a mythic heft to *Supernatural's* narrative aspirations by pitting brother against brother in both prosaic and epic ways. By the end of what can retrospectively be narrated as 'The Kripke Era,' Dean and Sam are positioned like pieces on a cosmic chessboard as the respective weapons of Heaven and Hell. Because *Supernatural's* internal mythology necessitates that angels and demons alike must inhabit human bodies in order to act on earth, much of the show's fourth and fifth seasons are dedicated to Sam and Dean resisting a fate for which they have apparently been destined from before their births: to serve as the 'vessels' for the archangel Michael and his fallen brother Lucifer in their battle for the end of the world.

Sam's upstanding moral rectitude and desire to do good is manipulated by the devil as he attempts to convince Sam to yield to him, while Dean is bewildered to find himself pressed into service as Heaven's 'Righteous Man.' As this storyline develops, it seems more and more likely that the story of the Winchesters will culminate with an epic battle between the brothers as the unwilling instruments of the world's destruction and the ultimate death of one at the hands of the other. It is a narrative trope that is rife with tragedy and melodramatic potential, to say nothing of the illustrious folkloric company in which the Winchester brothers thus find themselves. Cain and Abel are the obvious and textually-acknowledged antecedents for Sam and Dean's impending fraternal tragedy, although they join Romulus and Remus, Castor and Pollux, Baldur and Hoor, and so many other pairs of brothers fated to be violently separated forever by the caprices of gods or the whims of fate. In true *Supernatural* fashion, there is also a decidedly

American flavor to Kripke's storytelling that pits brother against brother in the bloody climax of a civil war that has been preordained since before Lucifer's rebellion against Heaven. Sam and Dean's bond with each other must overcome the very forces of fate that have manipulated their family for generations in order to form them as the perfect weapons to be wielded by Michael and Lucifer. It is, in a word, epic.

*Supernatural* would not exist without its focus on the relationship between Sam and Dean. It is the show's central animating principle and core emotional through-line, and so there is little wonder that many fans have apprehended and extrapolated upon the queer potentials that are almost structurally mandated between the brothers due to the show's narrative priorities. While Sam on his own does not inspire an explosion of queer utopian feeling – the number of fics written about Sam in queer relationship to a character other than Dean is vanishingly small – the intensity of the emotional and narrative stakes in the story of the Winchester brothers has long been recognized and extrapolated upon by fans. So strong is Dean's power as an avatar of queer futurity that it even transcends the incest taboo for those who read the brothers' connection as more than fraternal, as evidenced by the tongue-in-cheek name that this reading of the show has earned.

Colloquially referred to as Wincest within fandom spaces, the recognition of queer romantic and/or sexual potentials between Sam and Dean is certainly an example of reading too much into the representable narrative of *Supernatural*. Wincest apprehends Dean's endemic queer potential and uses it to extrapolate queerly upon the fraternal melodrama that animates the show. If, as I posit, the strategy of excessive reading allows practitioners a means by which to extrapolate upon moments of queer utopian futurity

that emerge as temporal ruptures in the text, then the fact that the text is structured around and narrated through the relationship between Sam and Dean allows more of these moments to occur. Catherine Tosenberger observes that, far from discouraging these temporal ruptures through which possible queer futures come into being, “as brothers, [Sam and Dean] are given a pass for displays of emotion that masculinity in our culture usually forbids, which intensifies the potential for queer readings” (Tosenberger 2008). The brothers’ devotion to each other is not incidental to the show’s internal logics but in fact creates those logics in the first place: all is right with the world when the Winchester brothers are in sync with each other, and the plot is always driving toward their reconciliation when they are at odds so that balance may be restored. Like Doty’s lesbian sitcoms, it would be entirely reasonable to characterize *Supernatural* as, as executive story editor Sera Gamble puts it, “the epic love story of Sam and Dean” (Tosenberger 2008).

Much has been written about the Wincest phenomenon, and rightly so, as the ship offers fertile ground for exploring a whole slew of fascinating angles on fandom, family, and the moral, political, and culturally-relative boundaries that give societies their shape. *Supernatural* has even engaged this fannish reading within the text of the show, acknowledging the existence of Wincest shippers on more than one occasion during some of the plot’s more explicit forays into diegetic metacommentary. Melodie Cardin suggests that the show’s acknowledgement of the queer possibilities that may be inferred between the brothers has something of a permissive effect for Wincest shippers, with *Supernatural*’s textual “treatment of its ‘slash’ fan fiction allow[ing] for polysemic interpretations of the brothers’ relationship to coexist with the platonic ‘canon’ storyline”

(Cardin 2018). Tosenberger suggests that fanfiction that pairs Sam and Dean romantically and/or sexually “treats incest not as a uniquely horrible transgression, but in the context of all of the other social norms the boys smash through in the course of the series,” using the queerness inherent in the incest taboo to consider the relativistic morality of *Supernatural*’s canonical norms. “Compared to their usual horrors,” writes Tosenberger, “consensual adult incest – a victimless crime, unlike, say, living on stolen credit cards or killing possessed people – starts looking relatively tame” (2008).

There is a uniquely pleasurable appeal in the exploration of and indulgence in forbidden desire through the relatively safe form of fiction, and “transformative works exploring forbidden fruits of incestuous brotherly desire flourish in fan communities” before and beyond the Winchesters (Roach 2019). This reading on the connection between Dean and Sam also echoes back to the grand potential tragedy of the brothers’ seemingly star-crossed fate wherein one will eventually have to kill the other, adding a sort of Romeo-and-Juliet frisson to the entire enterprise that is essentially fanfiction catnip. But as much as Sam and Dean’s relationship is the foundation upon which *Supernatural* is built, and as much as the narrative structure of the show is predicated on the strength of their bond with each other, the queer possibilities that emerge from this particular excessive reading of the show do not ever come into irreconcilable tension with the desire for textual acknowledgement that animates the political imperative of representation that matters, which, as I have suggested, is the impetus for *Supernatural*’s unexpectedly elongated trajectory.

Though Wincest shipping has constituted a meaningful portion of the fannish activity around *Supernatural* from essentially the show’s inception, it has generally been

understood that the show could not and would not transgress the incest taboo that is so inextricably bound up with the temporal logics of reproductive futurity that animate both the show's internal logics and those of the sociocultural environment in which it was produced. As the pervasive societal taboo against homosexuality has steadily weakened in no small part through the political imperative of representation that matters, that representation has undeniably become bound up with what Lee Edelman calls "the fantasy subtending the image of the Child [that] invariably shapes the logic in which the political itself must be thought" (Edelman 2004). Even though Sam and Dean are both biologically incapable of bearing children, *Supernatural's* interior logics are still notably beholden to reproductive futurity and the patriarchal power struggle between fathers and sons: a relational schema that must remain unquestioned in order for the storyworld to maintain coherence.<sup>62</sup>

If it is the power struggle between fathers and their sons that animates *Supernatural*, then *Supernatural* relies upon the temporal schemas and structures of patriarchy for its coherence. Patriarchy is predicated upon the control of the future through the control of women's reproductive capacities, which is to say that patriarchy relies fundamentally upon the centrality of the child to any viable vision of the future. If the function of the incest taboo is established as a means by which to guard against threats to that future – be they genetic, social, political or otherwise – then the incest taboo is foundational to the sustainability of patriarchal structures. And as much as

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<sup>62</sup> Of course, those characters who actually facilitate the coherence of these bonds – which is to say the women who either are or have the potential to be mothers – are narratively sidelined at best and more often violently eradicated after their future-sustaining reproductive capacities are no longer relevant. Shoutout to Kelly Kline.

*Supernatural* relies upon the bond between Sam and Dean, that bond is formed and sustained as the means by which the Winchester brothers save the world over and over again and thereby preserve their unfettered access to the wide open space of the future that patriarchy seeks to protect. In one important way, as evidenced by the presence of Wincest in the show's shipping cultures, *Supernatural* is indeed "the epic love story of Sam and Dean" (Tosenberger 2008). In another, more fundamental way, any serious acknowledgement of queer possibility between Sam and Dean would work in direct contravention of the incest taboo and thereby undermine the very foundations of the imagined future that the Winchester brothers are charged with preserving. The show's temporal structure in turn mirrors that of the cultural context of which *Supernatural* is a product, which views any kind of incestual eroticism as particular anathema to the sanctity of a future worth protecting. Put another way: even if the relationship between Sam and Dean does yield tremendous potential for reading too much into it, the representation of incest within our current chrononormative schema does not and cannot *matter*.<sup>63</sup>

#### Dean Winchester: Bisexual Disaster

In her chapter in *Queerbaiting and Fandom*, Emily E. Roach observes that "the brotherly bond between Sam and Dean, with its intensity and undercurrent of

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<sup>63</sup> Of course, there are always exceptions that prove the rule, but generally speaking sibling incest as a narrative strategy is deployed within representable narratives as a means of conveying horrific madness/deviance (as with Thomas and Lucille Sharpe in *Crimson Peak* (del Toro 2015) or the Lannister twins on *Game of Thrones*). Where it does appear on screen, it is not to be understood as aspirational, as it would have to be in order for Sam and Dean to successfully perform their primary narrative function as The Heroes.

homoeroticism, laid the foundations for queer subtextual readings of Dean” that were then built upon by fans in their extrapolation of Dean’s relationship with the angel Castiel. If the show does indeed teach viewers to value the intense homosocial bond at the center of the show, then it follows that readers invested in the queer possibilities that coalesce around the Winchester brothers would be primed to apprehend those potentials even outside of the brothers’ relationship to each other. And Dean, much more than Sam, lends himself remarkably well to the excessive reading that names and elaborates queer possibilities. Roach considers the ways in which “Dean has a more complex relationship with masculinity than surface readings might suggest,” positioning him as undergoing a “bisexual panic” that is signaled within the text of the show through Dean’s “capitulation to and simultaneous subversion of hegemonic modes of masculinity and early examples of inner turmoil” (Roach 2019).

Even before the introduction of Castiel in the episode that I will discuss herein, there is evidently something about Dean that invites the apprehension of queer potential independent of his connection with Sam. YouTube and Tumblr are rife with compilation videos with titles like “Dean Winchester being a disaster bi” and “Dean being ‘overtly heterosexual’ for 17 minutes bi” (as opposed to 17 minutes straight). I’ve made something of an informal study<sup>64</sup> of these and can confirm that there are a fair number wherein none of the clips selected have Dean interacting with either Sam or Castiel but with any number of one-off characters with whom he crosses paths throughout the series. Indeed, by the interpretive standards of a more contemporary show like *Brooklyn 99*, for

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<sup>64</sup> What’s the term? “Productive procrastination?”

example – wherein the character of Jake Peralta signals his canonical bisexuality implicitly within the text without ever explicitly coming out<sup>65</sup> – Dean’s sexual fluidity is as good as confirmed within the course of one scene wherein he goes to pieces over the titular character of his guilty pleasure soap opera *Doctor Sexy M.D.*

As Dean’s character arc progressed and brought him into narratively consequential homosocial relationships outside of his bond with Sam – namely with Castiel – it became more and more apparent to fans who practice excessive reading that “that Dean’s bisexuality [would] be explicitly acknowledged in canon by the time the show conclude[d].” Of course, the fact that fans far and away read Dean as bisexual as opposed to gay adds yet another temporal wrinkle to the question of his queer potentials, as bisexuality has proven notoriously problematic for mainstream media narratives to parse with any kind of consistency. In a format wherein things must be seen to be believed – wherein representation must be material in order to matter – bisexuality has proven challenging to the normative temporal logics of serialized mainstream narratives.

From within the temporal strictures of straight time, which inhere not only heterosexuality but the monogamy that it necessitates under patriarchal capitalism, bisexuality persists in precisely the kind of “ontologically humble state” that José Muñoz locates in queerness broadly conceived. The value of monogamy is fundamental to the ontological logics of straight time, which gains coherence through its investment in

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<sup>65</sup> Of course, the generic expectations of a half-hour workplace comedy like *Brooklyn 99* and an hour-long genre drama like *Supernatural* are notably different and so necessarily allow for differing modes of identity construction for their characters. However, like another Mike Schurr creation – Eleanor Shellstrop of *The Good Place* – Jake’s acknowledgement of his bisexual desires is made explicit without his ever having to adopt that particular identitarian noun. Although he does make a pretty compelling coming out speech on behalf of the canonically bisexual Rosa Diaz that might easily count on a technicality. But anyway, Mike Schurr’s incidentally bisexual characters are great and they make me happy.

reproductive futurity and the heteronormative imperatives of marriage. Bisexuality, by nature of its endemic plurality, becomes impossible to clearly define within the temporal logics of straight time through which representation comes to matter. “[S]exual discourse consistently erases bisexuality by assigning [it] to modes of temporality other than the present tense,” writes Lachlan MacDowall, “as if ‘everyone *were once bisexual*, or will be bisexual *in the future*, yet no one is bisexual *here and now*’” (MacDowall quoting Du Plessis 2009). Bisexuality cannot be represented outside of the instantiating logics of monogamy and straight time, and “bisexuality’s absence from the present moment” means that it has either already happened or is yet to occur, but cannot exist coherently or legibly within the temporal strictures of the here and now. Put another way, bisexuality in particular is a fertile temporal mechanism through which to access the then and there of queer futurity. The catch is that it then becomes impossible to represent in the ways that have come to matter politically in the here and now.

It is not impossible to represent bisexuality within the normative logics of the here and now, but these representations will inevitably transgress the chrononormative boundaries to which homonormative cultural politics have been inextricably tied. The metrics for ‘positive’ representations of LGBT+ subjecthood have become increasingly proscriptive with tools like the Vito Russo test, which requires that LGBT+ characters “are made up of the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight characters from one another” (GLAAD 2022). This is all well and good, of course, until a bisexual character transgresses any sort of normative boundary, when their transgressions are immediately linked to their sexuality irregardless of specificity to their holistic characterization. The internet is riddled with lists of characters whose bisexuality

is deemed ‘problematic’ when they fail to be anything other than temporally or circumstantially ‘normal,’ and therefore not really materially bisexual anymore. While strides in recent years have been made in the depiction of bisexuals within normative paradigms – shows like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Schitt’s Creek* come to mind – the history of ravenous, undiscerning, monstrous bisexuals in film and television has a strong gravitational pull. From the predatory bisexuality of powerful men on *House of Cards*, *Mr. Robot*, and *American Horror Story* to the terrifyingly unpredictable femmes fatale in movies and television shows too numerous to mention, canonical bisexuality has almost become an implicit marker of evil under temporal logics wherein transgression of normative boundaries will always be ‘problematic’ for the ambitions of LGBT+ assimilation heralded by the maxim ‘representation matters.’

And herein lies the fundamental tension between excessive reading and representation that matters in *Supernatural* particularly: Dean’s bisexuality remains obdurately unspoken, even as the cultural norms around televisual representations of LGBT+ identities underwent shifts that would have made his sexuality an asset rather than a liability over the course of *Supernatural*’s run had he been gay instead. But Dean, already a character who is essentially built out of all of the transgressed boundaries of the ‘apple pie life’ that he protects for others but cannot claim for himself, would run the risk of immediately becoming the kind of bisexual monster that gets written about in BuzzFeed listicles simply by virtue of his form and function within *Supernatural*’s narrative. As the language of intersectional media criticism found its way slowly into the common vernacular of fandom through the complex ecosystems of sites like Tumblr, the propensity for fans to get the rep sweats – “the feeling of anxiety that can come with

watching TV shows or movies starring people who look like you, especially when People Who Look Like You tend not to get a lot of screen time” – brought heightened scrutiny to any media property around which fannish attachment might form (Chow 2016).

Of course, I do not *necessarily* suggest that Dean Winchester’s bisexuality remained eternally unacknowledged because Eric Kripke and *Supernatural*’s subsequent showrunners were wary of being canceled if they got it wrong; the phenomenon of cancellation on the disastrous scale on which it can manifest on the contemporary social internet was still nascent at the height of *Supernatural*’s cultural prominence (although the uproarious memification of Destielgate might well count as cancellation by 2023 standards anyway). I merely wish to highlight the pitfalls that would have been inherent in the project of making Dean Winchester canonically bisexual at this point in the evolution of representation that matters. Dean is a problematic character at the best of times, and would in some crucial ways become an entirely different character if he were beholden to the proscriptive edicts of positive representation that evolved rapidly over the 15 years of the show’s tenure. Besides, in some ways there really is no better testament to Dean’s bisexuality than the fact that it cannot be reconciled with the expectations that he would have been beholden to as an icon of representation that matters – as he undoubtedly would have become due to *Supernatural*’s enormous cultural influence in the early history of fandom on the social internet.

“There is something fundamentally queer about internal conflict between oneself and dominant societal [...] expectations,” writes Roach, “and it is this conflict which has queer resonance and feeds speculation around Dean’s identity” (Roach 2019). I would characterize this observation as describing Dean’s fundamental excessivity to the norms

of his narrative context, which I have identified as one of the three main conditions that create an avatar of queer futurity. In his almost parodic hypermasculinity that sometimes gives way to deep insecurity and self-doubt, Dean is both too much and not enough at the same time. As I discuss in the previous section, he unproblematically fulfills the other requirements as well: his homosocial relationship with his brother Sam is the foundation for the entire show and his enduring narrative ties to trauma and the past position him queerly in relation to the narrative's linear-progressive time.

Regardless of his canonically-acknowledged identities, if the number of transformative works written about a character is a metric by which it is possible to measure that character's hospitality to queer potentials, then Dean Winchester undoubtedly provides fertile ground for the recognition of potential queer futures. Of the nearly 253,000 *Supernatural* fics published on Archive of Our Own as of this writing,<sup>66</sup> more than 196,000 are tagged as featuring Dean Winchester. Of these, 120,000 pair him romantically or sexually with another primary male character: roughly 95,000 with Castiel and 25,000 with Sam. There are 103,000 fics tagged under any heading as featuring 'Dean/Castiel' often referred to by the shipper's portmanteau 'Destiel,' and 31,000 tagged as 'Wincest' (Ao3 2022). For comparison, Sam features in only 18,000 queer slash fics that do not pair him with Dean, while Castiel appears in only 5,000. By my math, Dean is – and I swear on my car I couldn't make this up – 666% more likely to be read as queer than Sam is.

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<sup>66</sup> December 7, 2022.

## Televisual Time at the End of the World

It's almost unspeakably apropos that Dean's queerness should be in some way attached to the apocryphal number of the beast even in such an ephemeral way.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Dean's queerness emerges from Hell in very *concrete* ways even within the diegetic world of the show. *Supernatural's* third season ends bloody, with a demonic hellhound coming to collect on a deal that Dean had previously made with a demon.<sup>68</sup> After a season spent trying to evade his inevitable death and subsequent imprisonment in Hell, Dean and Sam make their final stand along with their allies against the gathering forces of a demon called Lilith. Dean's soul being forfeit at the end of one year after making a deal with a demon for Sam's salvation, a pack of demonic hellhounds tear him to shreds and drag his soul to the pits of Hell, where the camera fades on Dean imprisoned in a hell that appears to have been designed by the German Expressionists. He is trapped, fully cognizant of what is happening, as the show fades to black with Dean's pleas for rescue echoing through the darkness. It is, as season-finale cliffhangers go, pretty darn effective.

Presaged by breathless excitement from fans – many of whom were generating and consuming fanfiction that speculated on Dean's ultimate fate – *Supernatural's* fourth season premiered on September 18, 2008. The subprime mortgage crisis was nearing its nadir, threatening the global economy and causing violent reverberations across every major industry. The film and television industries, still reeling in the aftermath of the

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<sup>67</sup> Literally, I cannot believe that happened.

<sup>68</sup> I am consciously leaning into the camp ludicrousity of the plot points that I will be summarizing herein. There is a decided queerness to describing *Supernatural*, the storyworld of which is in such notable excess to the circumstances of the 'real world.' There will be demons, there will be angels, there will be birthday clowns in cowboy hats. Buckle in, y'all, because we're talking about *Supernatural*.

Writers Guild of America strike that had concluded in February, were of course shaken by the rapid constriction of the global markets and the looming specter of recession that would inevitably be ruinous for the arts. Fledgling television network The CW celebrated its second birthday with the premiere episode of what was quickly becoming the network's tentpole series. Though *Supernatural* had aired its first season on The WB before that channel was absorbed into the joint venture that would become The CW, all subsequent seasons would air on the new network which was now staring down the barrel of a perilous future if they could not meet their financial obligations.

*Supernatural* was “a perennial bubble show early in its run,” always at risk of cancellation or nonrenewal after every season finale (Thomas 2020). *Supernatural* was built for and created within an industrial structure wherein the revenue from cable advertising alone amounted to billions of dollars a year and a network's net worth could be given a real shot in the arm by the success of a serialized drama that could retain viewer interest from week to week and season to season. While *Supernatural* – like so many other cult television classics of its genre – was beloved by a vocal contingent of dedicated fans, those fans were not necessarily understood to be numerous enough by studio executives to justify the expense of producing *Supernatural* before the broad adoption of social media as a popular means of communication and collective action. There had, of course, been vociferous campaigns organized by fans to save their favored shows from cancellation for decades by the mid-2000s, and were certainly familiar to the network executives at the CW; the infamous ‘*Roswell* Is Hot’ campaign wherein fans sent Tabasco sauce en masse to the WB in order to save the sci-fi melodrama had made national headlines only a few years before in 2000. In 1991, members of Citizens

Opposed to the Offing of *Peaks* (COOP) “encourage[d] Peakheads to buy products of advertisers who sponsor[ed] *Twin Peaks* and then sen[t] the advertisers positive reinforcement letters along with proof of purchase slips,” perfectly demonstrating the economic savvy that so frequently attends dedicated fandom (Duffy 1991).

Fans have long understood that their attention is a commodity, although the media economies of which that attention has become currency have been somewhat slow to adapt. For the illustrious and dedicated members of COOP, the inherent value of their attention had to be laundered through the literal showing of receipts to advertisers whose material investment in a given show’s efficacy as a selling tool could conceivably stave off cancellation. Though fans of *Roswell* assuredly organized their campaign through communities formed in chat rooms and forums, these spaces were largely invisible to producers because they lacked the public-facing elements that would become hallmarks of the most successful social media platforms. Instead of simply appending a hashtag like #GiveElsaAGirlfriend to enough Tweets to get it trending or chipping in \$10 to Kickstart a *Veronica Mars* movie, fans of *Roswell* had to demonstrate their numbers by overwhelming the actual WB mail room with bottles of Tabasco, manifesting their economic power by physically imposing their fandom on a real place. And while the hot-sauce-and-emails strategy did work for *Roswell* in that rather magnificent instance, the heroic efforts of COOP did not succeed in prolonging *Twin Peaks*’ bat-shit-crazy televisual life – although they may have reunited once more in the lead-up to *Fire Walk With Me*. I have not confirmed this.

At this point, there is an almost mythic quality to the story of the cult television show that was unjustly canceled too soon by short-sighted executives who failed to

appreciate what they had. It is evident in the nearly elegiac reverence with which titles like *Firefly* and *Hannibal* and *My So-Called Life* are so often uttered both online and in-person. The crucial difference, I contend, in the case of *Supernatural* was the emergence of the public-facing social media platform as a means by which audience attention *itself* could be easily enumerated and commodified. Rather than needing to make careful note of each commercial that ran within a bloc of television and then go out and purchase those products in order to send the company proof of purchase – which is just an unreasonable amount of effort to put into a television show – fans could demonstrate their fandom even in the act of performing it. The early 2000s saw the emergence of fan enclaves on social networks like MySpace and LiveJournal and – just in the three years that *Supernatural* had been on the air – the twin explosions of Facebook and Twitter. Social media was radically changing the structures of social time that had been contingent for so long upon “a worldwide calendarity, a general economy of social time.” As Amy Villarejo observes in her history of the broadcast era in America, “[t]elevision is [...] the implantation of social time of the twentieth century” (Villarejo 2014).

Villarejo’s *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* meditates at length on the ways in which the temporal schema of broadcast television has been the structuring mechanism of social time throughout the American twentieth century. Contrasted with the nationalized broadcast environment of the BBC that so influenced the stakes and circumstances of *Sherlock*’s production and reception, *Supernatural* emerged from a privatized broadcast environment structured on “capitalist social relations [that] subsume all aspects of social life, so that even our capacity to pay attention becomes

commodified” (Villarejo 2014). *Supernatural*’s format of serialized hour-long<sup>69</sup> episodes airing weekly relied upon sustained audience attention – not only from week to week but through commercial breaks, as well. Its initial success was predicated solely upon its weekly share of the television audience who tuned in and watched the show as it was airing, a temporal restriction that seems almost unthinkable from within our contemporary media environment of binge-viewing and digital streaming and time-shifted reception. The concepts of the ‘water cooler moment’ and ‘must-see tv’ organized reception practices into an orderly temporality through which attention could be easily enumerated and ascribed monetary value by the answer to a single question: how many people watched *Supernatural* on television from week to week?

Of course, that question only yielded more questions that are ultimately more consequential to my argument about the co-emergence of queerbaiting and the *Supernatural* phenomenon. If the financial success of *Supernatural* (and by extension the success of the still-precarious CW) was reliant upon sustained weekly viewership, what would keep viewers interested? Is it possible to measure fannish investment using the emerging metrics of social engagement precipitated by the “massive change resulting from Internet technology” that contemporary scholars likened to “another industrial revolution” (Rosenberg and Feldman 2008)? How might it be possible to adapt to the radical shifts in the attention economy brought about by “[t]he proliferation of content production through the platform YouTube, the mobility of content from platform to

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<sup>69</sup> Of course, ‘hour-long’ is itself a temporal distortion brought about through the same schema of capitalistic social time, as the content of each hour-long episode of cable television only averages out to about 42 minutes. The rest of the hour-long bloc would, of course, be filled by breaks for commercial advertising.

platform,” and the unruly temporalities facilitated by the emerging capabilities of diverse and diffuse digital media technologies (Villarejo 2008)? As Villarejo observes: “the capacity of capitalist media to exploit new synergies and technologies [would] indisputably [...] change our use and experience of television.”

And indeed, social time *was* changing as the tenets of Scott’s convergence culture industry began to manifest in unexpected places such as the phenomenon of *Supernatural*. Social media was fast growing into an entertainment industry unto itself, with the internet becoming less a destination than an ever-present reality with the social integration of laptops, tablets, smartphones, and wifi. The first iPhone was unveiled by Steve Jobs in June of 2007, a little more than a year before *Supernatural*’s season 4 premiere. Twitter boasted more than one million active users in March of 2008, a figure which had exploded to around 58 million in 2009 when the show’s season 4 finale aired (Rao 2010). Tumblr released its first mobile app, tumbrette, in 2009 and saw unprecedented usage that grew exponentially throughout the next few years due in no small part to the emergence of fannish communities that coalesced around genre television shows, chief among which was *Supernatural*. The practice of video-remixing, which had existed in some form for years preceding the social internet, found new purchase and interest within the multimedia environments afforded by YouTube and Tumblr and fans established interplatform communities that could coalesce opportunistically across these myriad sites. Intrafandom affinities began to form and the public-facing social elements of fannish attachment that had migrated to the internet suddenly made it apparent to those within the media industries that sustained audience

attention and consistent engagement with a given show and its paratexts were powerful commodities in their own right.

The rapid evolution of the attention economy in the earliest days of the emerging social internet, exacerbated by the economic reverberations of the writers' strike and the 2008 financial crisis, created something of an apocalyptic energy in the whole of the mainstream media environment. *Supernatural*'s fourth season premiered into an ever-expanding transmedia environment wherein somber meditations on human folly like *Children of Men* (2006) and *The Road* (2009) flourished alongside the burgeoning tide of dystopian YA fiction – lead by Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) – that would saturate the market over the course of a socially turbulent decade. Politically, the media coverage surrounding the 2008 American presidential election reflected a similar sense of historical sea-change, albeit refracted in radically different ways through the political prisms of 'liberal' and 'conservative' 24-hour cable news channels. The election of Barack Obama only five weeks into *Supernatural*'s fourth season either signaled the ultimate healing of America's deep racial divisions and opened up a new and brighter future ... or he was literally the antichrist and the Biblical apocalypse was nigh. The seemingly decisive victory of 'progressive' sociopolitics heralded a collective journey toward the new world beyond the sunlit horizon of Obama's iconic campaign logo ... or the entire country was careening toward certain ruin and the only recourse to preventing the end of the world was to Make America Great Again.<sup>70</sup> In either case, that advertising

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<sup>70</sup> While the Manchurian Cantaloupe (thank you, Stephen Colbert) wouldn't hork up the red hat for another several years following the 2008 presidential election, the sentiments were evident immediately. The so-called Tea Party Republicans were undoubtedly the predecessors of what we might now simply refer to as MAGA, and those fools had crawled out of the sewers by 2009.

revenue spends the same, as networks still indebted to the temporal logics of an aging and increasingly-precarious economic model learned quickly.

The power of the social internet to leverage and incite political and cultural change was a heady and potent one in September of 2008. As the seemingly implacable institutions of the financial and political environments were being destabilized, as the creative industry responsible for *Supernatural* and the still-nascent network that produced it were trying to find solid ground in the aftermath of the writers' strike and a recent corporate merger, as emerging digital technologies were uprooting the temporal structures of televisual time and displacing the commodity of attention through the mechanisms of convergence, the social internet afforded media fans unprecedented power to talk back to producers, to engage with paratexts, and to leverage their collective influence in new and unpredictable ways. The feeling of the end of something permeated through essentially every facet of the sociopolitical and cultural moment – it is a moment of temporal contestation the instability of which precipitated pitched battles over cultural, political, technological, and social control of the future. In an historical moment wherein the linear-progression of straight time toward a reproductive future that would merely replicate the status quo seemed to be materially at risk, perhaps this moment of temporal rupture provided a particularly hospitable environment from within which to imagine queer utopias.

## Lazarus Rising

This is, in any case, the environment into which Dean Winchester was ultimately reborn, bringing with him the end of one world for *Supernatural* and the temporal rupture that ultimately brought about another, queerer future. Indeed, *Supernatural* episode 4.1: ‘Lazarus Rising’ really couldn’t have been more appropriately named if Eric Kripke – who wrote the episode itself in addition to the larger narrative arc of which it is a part – had actually been able to predict the future. I understand this episode as existing in five narrative acts, and will here take the opportunity to once again practice what I preach with regards to reading too much into it. As with the dinner scene at Angelo’s in *A Study in Pink*, “Lazarus Rising” marks the moment in *Supernatural* that launched more than one hundred thousand fics at the time of this writing. Whether intentional or not, premeditated or accidental, the episode primes viewers for excessive reading in both implicit and explicit ways. By the episode’s end, Dean and Castiel have been undeniably linked by bonds of excessivity and temporal queerness and have facilitated temporal ruptures that would open up countless moments of queer utopian possibility in the seasons following their initial meeting. For as impactful as their first meeting proved to be, Castiel and Dean share what amounts to little more than five minutes of screen time in a 42-minute episode.

So rife with queer possibility is “Lazarus Rising” that its queerness even reciprocally inflects the text that inspired its general narrative shape. The title is indebted to Kripke’s evident biblical fascinations, particularly with the Gospel of John, which is the only one of the canonical gospels to include both the story of Lazarus *and* the Book

of Revelations. “Lazarus Rising” alludes to Jesus’ miraculous resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany from an untimely death, the account of which includes some fascinating opportunities for queer excessive reading.<sup>71</sup> Jesus gets word from Lazarus’ sisters when his friend falls ill: “So the sisters sent word to Jesus, [saying] ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’” Jesus returns to Bethany in spite of his disciples’ protestations only to find that Lazarus has been dead for days. Upon witnessing Jesus weeping at the news, those around him observe: “See how he loved him!” And, in the consequential moment of resurrection and rebirth into a new life beyond the confines of straight time, Jesus exhorts Lazarus forth from his tomb by calling to him: “Lazarus, come out!”

Like. The fic just kinda writes itself.

In *Supernatural*, the analogous Lazarus character is Dean, who finds himself suddenly ripped from his imprisonment in Hell and restored miraculously to his own healed and healthy body... although that body is still buried six feet underground in a wooden coffin. In the episode’s harrowing opening scene, Dean must claw his way out of his own grave and into the new life into which he has been reborn. And ‘rebirth’ is indeed the appropriate term, as the central visual metaphor of the scene is unmistakable. A close-up of Dean’s trembling hands as they struggle into the open air cuts to an overhead shot of a simple wooden cross, in front of which those hands struggle to find purchase. With a gasp, Dean emerges head-first from the terrestrial birth canal, pulling himself with great

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<sup>71</sup> Incidentally, Jesus Christ is a pretty solid avatar of queer futurity himself when judged using the metrics that I have proposed here. He is uniquely capable of performing miracles outside the normative expectations of his narrative context – hence their categorization as ‘miracles’ – and is temporally unruly even before he outlives his own death. He also mostly hangs out with other men with whom he has essentially *all* of his narratively significant social relationships. In another search done in the name of research that has definitely put me on a list somewhere, I went looking for evidence of fan production to corroborate this theory and... yeah. It exists. Judas/Jesus OTP.

effort from the clutches of his own grave. No longer only a hunter of monsters meting out justice to those creatures who violate the ‘natural order,’ Dean is now such a creature himself. Ghosts, zombies, revenants, vampires, ghouls: Dean’s typical posture towards beings that return unsanctioned from the dead is a homicidal one, making the stakes of his inexplicable return from Hell particularly existentially fraught.

Immediately, there is a horror to this rebirth from within Dean’s own temporal schema that is only exacerbated as he takes in the full circumstances of his resurrection. The camera circles Dean as he rises to his feet in the blown-out sunlight, the ominous score swelling as the camera pulls back on the aftermath of a violent explosion that has felled every tree in a perfect ring of destruction with Dean’s grave at the center. Clearly, whatever caused Dean to return to the world is, to use his own phrase from later in the episode, “bad mojo” (Kripke 2008). When he leaves his gravesite to wander down a deserted dusty road shimmering with heat haze, Dean comes across a ramshackle filling station and, finding it closed, breaks in. In the shabby convenience store, Dean finds a newspaper<sup>72</sup> dated Thursday, September 18, 2008: he has been dead and buried for months. Dean, always a bit temporally unruly, has now well and truly crossed the Rubicon into the realm of full-on temporal queerness. Finding a mirror, Dean examines his whole, undecayed, unviscerated body – clad in tight black t-shirt and low-slung jeans, just in case you’d forgotten that Jensen Ackles is hot during the show’s hiatus – his

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<sup>72</sup> The front page headline of this newspaper reads “Serial Arsonist Sought.” It is a reference to the modus operandi of the demon who killed Sam and Dean’s mother and then, twenty years later, Sam’s girlfriend Jess by pinning them to the ceiling and lighting them on fire. This is an example of what fans refer to as an ‘easter egg:’ “an intentional inside joke, [...] image, or secret feature of a work” included by producers to attract fannish attention and the secondary economy that it sustains. Even before the introduction of Castiel, *Supernatural* was already intentionally capitalizing on fannish attachment – albeit of a more affirmational than transformative kind.

mind flashing back to his violent and bloody death at the jaws of hellhounds. Lifting his shirt,<sup>73</sup> Dean examines his unmarred torso before pulling up his left sleeve, wincing in pain as he reveals the raised red mark of a human handprint burned into his shoulder. Again, the awesome nature of the as-yet unseen power that is responsible for Dean's resurrection has visceral, material resonances within the representable narrative, inscribed like a brand onto Dean's very body.

Evidently overcoming his fear and confusion, Dean helps himself to food and water from the abandoned store. Snacking on a candy bar and wandering the aisles, he encounters a rack of magazines and, smirking, selects *Busty Asian Beauties*. Paging through the magazine before stowing it with the rest of his loot, Dean is in the process of emptying the cash register when the old television behind the counter turns on with a burst of snowy static. Dean turns it off, his hunting instincts kicking in as he begins to survey his surroundings like a soldier. The radio turns on, then the television again, and all the while a dense, insistent humming is building beneath the scene's diegetic sounds. Finding salt on one of the shelves, Dean begins to fortify his defenses by pouring salt lines at all points of egress but is quickly overwhelmed by the insistent ringing that grows louder and louder until the windows begin to shatter in explosive showers of glass. The salt does nothing to protect Dean, his hunter's instincts entirely unprepared for whatever is happening here as he cowers behind the counter. The walls are buffeted by some explosive force, the earth shaking and knocking Dean to the ground before everything

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<sup>73</sup>-Hell apparently does good things for the core. This whole sequence of hilariously unsubtle male 'eye candy' may seem quite familiar in 2022, but *Supernatural* was actually in the vanguard of this as in so many other things. 2010 would bring about the unapologetic horniness of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and from there the dam kind of breaks on a certain aesthetic and narrative strategy that might be called (barely) narratively necessary nudity or, as critic Glen Weldon has called it, simply "shirtlessness."

abruptly stops and the dusty filling station is quiet once more – save for the crunch of glass as Dean gets to his feet. The devastation here bears striking resemblance to that which Dean had encountered as he clawed his way from his grave, creating a visual bookend to the scene of his rebirth and making it clear that whatever awesome power has rescued him from Hell, that power has attached itself specifically to Dean.

And herein lies a circumstantial excessivity far beyond Dean's physical beauty, his matter-of-fact larceny, and his racist and misogynist taste in masturbatory material. Through his rebirth into a life unbound from the limitations of straight time, Dean has become something more than merely human, inextricably attached to forces that are more powerful than the limitations of the known world. The episode is structured as a mystery, following Dean from the 'scene of the crime' and through his hunt for whatever creature it is that has raised him. In the process, Dean's temporal queerness and narrative excessivity are tied to whatever force has caused them – which turns out within the last several minutes of the episode to be the being with whom Dean will form a particularly profound bond and an enormously consequential homosocial relationship for *Supernatural's* ultimate trajectory. Although Castiel does not appear until 39 minutes into the episode, the thrust of the entire narrative arc is his relationship to Dean and – intentionally or not, premeditated or unanticipated – the attendant temporal rupture within *Supernatural's* storyworld that would open up countless moments of queer utopian possibility.

As the first act closes, Dean locates a payphone in a moment that has – viewed through a contemporary eye – become something of a temporal rupture in and of itself. After first attempting to reach Sam only to find that the number has been disconnected,

Dean then calls Bobby Singer. The older hunter, gruff and abrupt, answers the phone and, when Dean identifies himself, just as quickly hangs up again. When Dean calls back, Bobby's tone has gone from neutral to actively threatening: "This ain't funny. Call again and I'll kill you." It becomes evident to Dean that Bobby will not believe in his resurrection until he can see it for himself. Adding to his growing list of crimes for the day, Dean hotwires one of the old cars that is parked beside the filling station: a dusty white boat of a thing that bears a washed-out, photonegative resemblance to Dean's shiny, immaculate black Impala. As he peels out of the dusty lot and speeds off down the empty road, it is odd to see Dean driving a car that is not his own. He is himself and not himself, a sort of unmoored phantom of Dean Winchester, a ghost of his former self who has no tangible connections to a world to which he should never have been able to return.

In the second of the episode's five acts, Dean must be reintegrated into the normative logics of *Supernatural's* patrilineal temporality in order to reclaim his place within the representable world of the narrative. It is through his homosocial relationships that Dean ceases to be an echo or a ghost; it is only when his existence can be reaffirmed through his connections to Bobby and Sam that Dean can he once again be caught up in the linear-progressive logics of the investigative narrative rather than remaining in the temporally-nebulous limbo of the unobserved. Dean is alone throughout the first act of the episode, unobserved by any but himself and whatever it is that has attached itself to him. And even when Dean does show up at Bobby's door, the older hunter's shock and confusion quickly gives way to suspicion and the conviction that Dean is not himself, but has returned from the dead as a monster to be hunted and eradicated. When Bobby attacks Dean with a silver knife, believing him to be any number of monstrous revenants

returned from the grave with malicious intent, Dean reaffirms his identity to Bobby by telling him things only the real Dean could know. He emphasizes the paternal intimacy of their connection, telling Bobby: “You’re about the closest thing that I have to a father” (Kripke 2008). Proving himself to Bobby by voluntarily cutting his flesh with the silver knife and enduring a splash of Holy Water to the face, Dean must reaffirm his normativity in the wake of temporal transgression against the permanence of death. By the internal narrative logics of *Supernatural*, wherein monsters like vampires, ghouls, and ghosts must be eradicated with extreme prejudice, Dean’s seemingly unproblematic escape from Hell is not so much a miracle as an ill omen.

Bobby’s misrecognition of Dean speaks to the singularity of his emerging significance within the narrative: he has returned from the dead, but is not a monster. He is whole and unscarred but for the handprint burned into his shoulder, which seemingly connects him to a dangerous and unknown force. He is emphatically not the same person that he was when he was ripped apart by hellhounds, and for all that Bobby’s eventual recognition grounds Dean firmly within the here-and-now of the storyworld, there is also a sense of then-and-there coalescing around Dean Winchester that will result in an explosion of queer imagination upon his first meeting with Castiel. As Dean and Bobby exchange exposition, Dean learns that Sam had refused to give Dean a traditional hunter’s burial of pyre cremation because he insisted that Dean would need a body when Sam got him back. Dean, assuming that Sam has made a deal with a demon in exchange for his rescue, resolves to find his brother as quickly as possible by accessing the GPS on his phone. When Dean easily rattles off the details of the fake identity that Sam has given the phone company, Bobby asks how he could have possibly guessed that his brother

would use the alias Wedge Antilles. Dean, emphasizing the centrality of the Winchester brothers' relationship to the coherence of the narrative, responds: "Are you kidding me? What don't I know about that kid?" Dean learns that Sam is in a seedy hotel in Pontiac, Illinois, near the site of Dean's erstwhile burial, and he and Bobby hasten to find Sam and learn the cost of Dean's resurrection.

The reunion between the Winchester brothers in the third act of the episode marks the narrative reification of Dean's queer potentials while at the same time reinforcing the temporal boundaries around the incest taboo and foregrounding Sam's inherent and undeniable straightness. When Dean and Bobby track down Sam and knock on his hotel room door, they are met by a dark-haired young woman in a tank-top and underwear. As she mistakes them for pizza delivery men, Sam appears behind her to investigate. Sam is reintroduced here through the lens of his evidently active heterosexuality but stops dead at the sight of his older brother. Queerness enters the scene attached to Dean in an illustrative example of Tosenberg's "displays of emotion that masculinity in our culture usually forbids," also known as Boy Melodrama™, a fannish term for the trope that would be sent up in *Supernatural's* 200th episode many seasons later in the song "A Single Man-Tear" (Thompson and Lennertz 2014). Though Sam initially misrecognizes Dean by dint of his temporal queerness (read: monstrosity), physically throwing Dean against the wall before Bobby vouches for him, the Winchester brothers eventually share what can only be called a passionate – if platonic – embrace, clutching each other close and visibly overcome by the intensity of their joy.

Sam's straightness reasserts itself – or perhaps *herself* – as the brothers break apart and the as-yet-unnamed dark-haired girl asks: "So are you two like... together?"

While Dean's response is an affronted glare, it is Sam who speaks the interdiction that forecloses any possibility for such a queer future by responding that Dean is his brother. The implication, of course, is that Dean is Sam's brother and therefore definitionally cannot also be his lover. The temporal boundaries around the incest taboo within *Supernatural's* patrilineal logics are and remain inviolate without Dean ever uttering a word in repudiation of the queer potentials that the girl perceives and proceeds to name, bringing the unspoken queerness that has been gathering around Dean into the representable timeline of the narrative while at the same time embodying Sam's lack of any such potential. Though this reunion scene is replete with opportunities for reading too much into it, it is distinctly less hospitable to the question of representation that matters for any romantic future between Sam and Dean.

Wincest: acknowledged. Wincest: denied.

The emphasis placed on Sam's narrative no-homo as the brothers and Bobby trade yet more exposition is notable and not particularly in-character for the usually conscientious, gentlemanly Sam. He forgets his one-night-stand's name as she leaves, awkwardly shutting the door in her face in a show of macho disinterest that might be more understandable coming from 'bad-boy' Dean. There are reminders of Sam's normative heterosexual masculinity littered throughout the exchange, from Sam cockily informing Dean that he does not need to pay for sex to Dean discovering a lacy bra lying abandoned at the foot of Sam's rumpled bed. The force of these fixative signifiers is not really a match for the strength of Dean's queerness, however, and the scene affords opportunities for several more impassioned speeches in which Sam and Dean reestablish their devotion to each other as Sam reveals that he tried but ultimately failed to bargain

for Dean's soul. The episode's driving question remains as-yet unanswered: if Sam didn't pull Dean out, then what did?

As the narrative moves into the fourth act, Sam and Dean fall into the habituated rhythms of the hunt: investigate, identify, track, pursue, kill. As he slides behind the wheel in his joyful reunion with his beloved Impala, Dean reprimands Sam for having an iPod connected to the car's sound system. It's a pointed reminder of the brothers' distinct orientations to linear time, with Sam always advancing towards a distant future while Dean remains stubbornly determined by and devoted to the events and relationships that have shaped him thus far. Indeed, although Dean has told both Sam and Bobby that he doesn't remember anything of Hell, he is tormented when alone by flashing, violent fragments of the afterlife *before* his mysterious current life that make his search for answers feel all the more urgent. As the Winchesters and Bobby search for answers to the many questions raised by Dean's... raising... they travel to consult with a psychic named Pamela Barnes.

An attractive, flirty 'cool girl,' Pamela takes an immediate shine to both Dean and Sam, lustfully eyeing them both up before inviting them into her home to participate in a seance intended to identify Dean's rescuer. Pamela is a key figure in establishing the ever-indeterminate and unruly queerness that emerges as a result of Dean's return from the dead. While Sam's interactions with the demon Ruby later in the episode serve to fix and concretize his heterosexual futurity, Dean's lustful connection with Pamela only reinforces how outside of normative expectations he has become as a result of his interrupted timeline. As Pamela bends low to retrieve something from a shelf, Dean

notices a tattoo on her lower back that reads ‘Jesse Forever.’ After (creepily) elbowing Sam to draw his attention to Pamela’s ink, Dean initiates this exchange:

Dean, smirking: Who’s Jesse?

Pamela, blithe: Well, it wasn’t forever.

Dean, flirty: His loss.

Pamela, seductive: Might be your gain. (She walks away).

Dean, to Sam: Dude, I’m so in.

Sam, amused: Yeah, she’s gonna eat you alive.

Dean, horny: Hey, I just got out of jail; bring it.

Pamela, to Sam, saucy: You’re invited too, Grumpy. (She walks away again).

Dean, to Sam, forcefully: You are *not* invited.

In this short and altogether charming exchange, several narrative dynamics are subverted, emphasized, and reinforced. Pamela, whose presence within the patrilineal and reproductive dynamics of *Supernatural*’s temporal schema might easily be overdetermined by her past, manages to escape the trap by denying the assumed ‘forever’ of heterosexual romance and the assumptive finitude of monogamy. In propositioning both Dean and Sam, she shows little regard for the boundaries of normative time – even the inviolate narrative ring of salt surrounding the queer specter of incest.

Dean, meanwhile, both reifies and subverts normative expectations around his particular brand of blue-collar white masculinity by objectifying Pamela’s body while at the same time expressing inordinate excitement at the prospect of her ‘eating him alive’ in bed. While I have trouble believing that Kripke intentionally wrote this phrase in order to allude to anilingus, Dean’s penchant for being the receiving partner in penetrative

intercourse is nevertheless well-documented and -elaborated even in the fanfiction that reads him in sexual relationship to women – including Pamela Barnes. The over 16,000 pieces on Ao3 tagged “bottom Dean Winchester” had to have come from somewhere, and Dean’s evident excitement at the idea of Pamela dominating him doesn’t detract from that reading.<sup>74</sup> While his objectification of Pamela and his rather pervy decision to involve his brother in his lechery hew closely to Dean’s established version of successful masculinity, his justification for this submissive desire to be ‘eaten alive’ reinforces the temporal queerness of his circumstances. He tells Sam that his time in Hell justifies the non-normative nature of his desire to be ‘eaten alive,’ but stops short of transgressing the incest taboo even after Pamela suggests that Sam come – so to speak – too. Both Sam and Dean have now spoken the interdiction against Wincest, further emphasizing that any such polysemic queerness as fans might apprehend between the brothers would stay well and truly in the unspoken and unrepresentable realm of transformative fan/tasy.

As Sam, Dean, and Bobby sit around a small table with Pamela, the psychic begins the ritual of the seance. In a darkened room lit only by the light of the candles gathered in the middle of the table, Pamela instructs the men to take each other’s hands, adding that she needs to touch something that the “mystery monster” touched before grabbing suggestively at Dean beneath the table. “Woah!” he protests. “Well, he didn’t touch me there!” Pamela’s saucy (and non-consensual) grope both preserves her flirtatious power over Dean and undermines it, opening up further queer possibilities

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<sup>74</sup> I need to emphasize here that the politics of ‘topping’ as elaborated within fannish spaces are their own minefield and – mercifully – outside the scope of this project. However, I don’t wish to inadvertently reinforce any inherent conflation of bottoming with submission.

when Dean uses the pronoun ‘he’ in the context of intimate touching. Dean ultimately rolls up his shirt sleeve to expose the handprint, to which Pamela fits her palm as she begins her invocation. Immediately, her efforts yield results as the television bursts on in a screech of feedback and the room fills with the subsonic rumbling ring that Dean recognizes from the abandoned gas station. When Pamela, her eyes still closed, first utters the creature’s name – “Castiel?” – Dean’s head whips toward her as if magnetized. The insistent drone grows louder as the being warns Pamela not to look at its face, though she insists that she doesn’t scare easily and ignores the command. As she continues to invoke, conjure, and command Castiel to show her his face, the earth beneath the room begins to quake as the candles dance unsteadily in a preternatural wind. As the candles flare to the ceiling and Pamela starts to scream, the psychic’s eyes ignite in bright white fire only to leave bloody, empty sockets in their place. Shocked and trembling in Bobby’s arms as Sam calls for an ambulance, Pamela whimpers “I can’t see, I can’t see” over and over while Dean looks down on her in horror.

In attempting to look upon the still-faceless force called Castiel, Pamela Barnes loses her ability to see. While she can still access the then-and-there thanks to her psychic gifts after she heals and returns to *Supernatural* in a later episode, attempting to *see* Castiel – to show her his face so that she might represent him to others – proves ruinous for her ability to perceive the world of the here-and-now. As the final act of the episode begins, Sam reports to Dean that Pam is stable as the two sit together in a sparsely-populated diner before the brothers are accosted by a group of demons, one of whom threatens to drag Dean back to Hell herself. In a compelling example of the power that Dean’s temporal excessivity grants him, he calls her bluff, saying that “whoever it was

[that pulled him out], they want [him] out. And they're a lot stronger than [the demons]" (Kripke 2008). To drive the point home, Dean actually slaps her across the face twice in a breathtaking act of bravado that would have been significantly more challenging for pre-Hell Dean to accomplish. When she doesn't retaliate, Dean condescendingly saunters from the diner with Sam. They are at odds in their priorities as they discuss their plan of action, with Sam insisting that they must neutralize this immediate threat while Dean's attention remains fixed on Castiel. Though Sam and Dean are reunited and ostensibly acting once again in concert, their honesty with each other is not absolute. The narrative splits at this point and orients the brothers separately in relation to each other and to their shared narrative temporalities. Dean is trapped in Hell even as he walks the earth in search of the thing that raised him, and now has Pamela's disfigurement on his conscience. As he dreams in fragmentary flashes of his time in Hell, Sam quietly leaves Dean for the first time since their reunion.

Sam, far from being the bitter chauvinist that he appears to be during his reunion with Dean, has in fact been working with the demon Ruby to hone the psychic powers acquired through a complex backstory that I will not recount in detail here, but which allow Sam to exorcize demons and sometimes see the future.<sup>75</sup> Ruby, it turns out, is possessing the body of the dark-haired girl from the motel room while she and Sam hunt down demons, although Sam lies to Dean and tells him that she has died and that he is not using his powers. When Sam finds and exorcizes the demons who had threatened them earlier, Ruby encourages him in the use of his growing powers. In addition to a

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<sup>75</sup> Forget it, Jake. It's *Supernatural*.

distinct flavor of mentorship, Ruby's connection to Sam feels deliberately romantic – or at least, their relationship has progressed beyond platonic comradeship and into something deeper and more sustained. While Sam's unique abilities make him narratively excessive in his own way, this excessivity is still oriented toward a representable 'straight' future that Sam sees in his visions and advanced through Sam's desire for Ruby and the addictive power that she represents. The future that Sam can see is intelligible and representable within the temporal logics of *Supernatural's* patriarchal cosmology – attempting to see it leaves his eyes completely intact and it is predicated upon Sam's romantically-inflected collaboration with the ostensibly female Ruby. In a paratextual wrinkle that serves to further fix Sam's straightness, Ruby is played by the actress Genevieve Cortese, who eventually married Jared Padalecki after meeting him on this shoot. The retroactive apprehension of the real chemistry between the two performers concretizes the temporal circumstances of their shared heterosexual desire and forestalls yet more moments of queer possibility that might have otherwise emerged around Sam as a consequence of his emotional reunion with his brother and the seeming excessivity of his psychic abilities.

Dean and Bobby, meanwhile, have covered the inside of an abandoned barn with protective charms and sigils from every possible tradition. Because they know nothing about their adversary save for his awesome and ruinous power, the hunters are armed to the teeth as Bobby begins to read out the words of a summoning ritual. Though it appears at first that the ritual has not worked, the same violent wind and rumbling earth precede the explosive entrance – finally, with four minutes left – of the heretofore unseen but inordinately powerful force known as Castiel. His entrance is a masterful study in

contradiction and indeterminacy: the heavy crossbar of the barn's wide doors splinters without physical force before a figure whose appearance would be distinctly underwhelming if not for the explosive and earth-shaking consequences borne out by the environmental response to his presence. After an entire episode of increasingly menacing invisibility, Castiel's representable entrance into the narrative only serves to further destabilize him instead of fixing him within the normative expectations of genre shows like *Supernatural*. Though ostensibly just a man of about Dean's age dressed in business casual clothing, none of the weapons that Bobby or Dean deploy seem to hinder Castiel at all. It is almost as though his seemingly innocuous appearance is the most monstrous of all possibilities, as it serves to confirm the episode's frequent observations before he appears that Castiel is excessive and dangerous and more powerful than anything the Winchesters have faced before.

In the account of their first confrontation that begins this chapter, I've been quite intentional in synthesizing some of the most florid and well-used tropes and phrases and moments of queer utopian futurity understood to be inherent in the scene among readers and writers of extrapolative fanfiction. Besides being absolutely delightful to write, my hope is that this exercise will emphasize the meaning with which this scene becomes fraught when practicing excessive reading. Everything about this interpretation of the text is *inherently* too much. Eyes are too vivid, gazes too arresting, the shocking white of the sparks that fly making everything too bright to see – or maybe bright enough to *finally* see, depending on whom you ask. Tagged and referenced in countless transformative works that extrapolate on the queer possibilities opening up between Dean and Cas, 'Lazarus Rising' marks a turning point in *Supernatural*'s original narrative arc with the

appearance of the angelic forces that would have assumptively catalyzed the series' final apocalyptic showdown. Instead, I contend that both the narrative and sociocultural circumstances of this moment resulted in an opening up of queer potential so powerful that the show itself could not resist its gravitational pull. If Dean is reborn in this episode as a fully-realized avatar of queer futurity, then Cas bursts forth as such fully formed: an excessively powerful if strangely unassuming figure who, in resurrecting *Supernatural's* resident Lazarus, changes not only Dean's trajectory but indeed the future of the entire show.

### The Profound Bond

Despite his bombastic entrance, Castiel was not originally intended to become a recurring character on the show, let alone “the third leg in a tripod of *Supernatural* perfection” (Aguilera 2015). Actor Misha Collins' original contract was for a three-episode arc in which his primary narrative function would be to introduce angels to the show's canon. He is essentially an *angelus ex machina* of sorts: an expedient mechanism by which to return Dean to the show's narrative timeline and introduce the stakes of the show's ultimate conflict in one fell swoop. Had any number of circumstantial stars failed to align – if the CW weren't a new and relatively fragile network, if Tumblr had delayed its launch or botched its user interface, if Misha Collins hadn't had his coffee the day they shot the barn scene – *Supernatural's* ending would likely have come about as Kripke had written it. Instead, Castiel proved to be one of those characters – like *Breaking Bad's*

Jesse Pinkman<sup>76</sup> or Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – who proved too charismatic, popular, and narratively interesting to obey his predestined timeline or narrative function. A quote attributed to Kripke himself that has circulated within online fan communities for years summarizes things succinctly:

The reason that Angels are such a big deal on the show is because of *Misha*. Had someone else come in as Cas and stiffed it we would have only done a one year angel storyline and then we would have moved on to something else. He was so endlessly interesting and then you started fleshing out his world and because Misha was so compelling it *evolved*.

This account of Castiel's trajectory almost sounds like the recollection of falling in love. There is something of the fairy tale about it, with Misha Collins as the hero of the piece: the unassuming guest star plucked from obscurity who rises to become the series' third lead. It is not in the least surprising to me that such a quotation would find purchase on Tumblr, as it so ably echoes fans' own reactions to Castiel as well as the familiar and compelling narrative beats of the Cinderella story. And while I have not been able to verify the source of this comment, the tone of immediate attraction and increasing fascination attributed to Kripke here is echoed in Collins' own recollection of his developing relationship with *Supernatural*, which he notably describes as analogous to a romantic connection.

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<sup>76</sup> Jesse was supposed to be killed off at the end of *Breaking Bad*'s first season but ended up being unquestionably integral to the show's success: the definition of a fan favorite. Interestingly – although perhaps not surprisingly given the historical circumstances that I've laid out – Castiel and Jesse are both products of the same televisual cycle: the first season of *Breaking Bad* and the fourth season of *Supernatural* were both aired during the 2008 - 2009 season.

It was a gradual evolution for me. It wasn't just [that] I went from guest star to series regular immediately. It was like three episodes – ‘Alright, we'll give you six,’ – ‘Alright we'll give you 10,’ – Alright, we'll give you 12. [...] We dated. *Supernatural* and I dated before we got married (Collins in Aguilera 2015).

And this gradualist approach to Castiel's integration into the essential fabric of *Supernatural*'s success cannot have been independent of the fannish enthusiasm with which the character was immediately greeted. Cas' evolution from convenient plot device to the show's third lead was inevitably influenced by the temporal rupture in *Supernatural*'s narrative brought about by his resurrection of Dean and the new queer futures that suddenly became imaginable with their every subsequent interaction.

Castiel's relationship with Dean became effectively an internal combustion engine by which fannish investment could be fomented through storylines that brought the two into situations fraught with high emotion and opportunity for melodrama. With both fans and producers beginning to find their footing on the still-shifting ground of cultural convergence, the capitalistically-oriented loops of fan/producer feedback from which queerbaiting emerges were beginning to form, and each new plot development between Dean and Castiel would bring with it a flood of fannish investment that would then encourage the producers to write more of the same. Fittingly, the total number of hugely significant plot points that hang on Dean and Cas' growing devotion to each other throughout the show's run is far too excessive for me to discuss in any detail here. *Supernatural*'s longevity has been such that the overarching plot is astonishingly dense with demon deals and double-crosses and deaths that tend not to stick, to say nothing of the subnarratable elements of filmic storytelling that are at least as crucial to strategies of

excessive reading and probably moreso. With every sharp intake of a breath, each brush of fingers, each instance of Cas' angelic disregard for personal space, innumerable queer new worlds became imaginable and extrapolatable by fans who operationalized their excessive reading through writing and sharing fanfiction, fanart, vidding, shitposting, meta-analysis, and all of the other specialized modes of engagement that fall under the purview of transformative fandom within the convergence culture industry. Indeed, the sheer volume of meaningful eye contact between Cas and Dean has yielded countless memes over the course of the years and been immortalized in YouTube video compilations with titles like "Literally 10 minutes of Basically Every Time DEAN and CAS Did The Thing With The Eyes" (Bakasara 2014).

While this propensity within the developing narrative for Dean and Castiel to be ripped apart and reunited may bear superficial resemblance to the relationship between Sam and Dean, the implications – because of the characters' unique and co-emergent temporal queerness – are very different. As Roach observes, "[when] Castiel and Dean work together [...] Castiel fills the space left by Sam both literally and metaphorically, but he also transforms it for Dean and the audience. Castiel opens up erotic possibilities that are not available with Sam, because Sam and Dean are brothers" (Roach 2019). Where the erotic possibilities – queer utopias – perceivable between Sam and Dean are confined to the realm of the unrepresentable by dint of *Supernatural's* endemic reproductive futurism, those that open up between Dean and Castiel are not so temporally constrained. Even in "Lazarus Rising," each indexical apprehension of queer potentials between the Winchester brothers is shut down immediately – Wincest acknowledged, Wincest denied – while the episode ends *in the midst of* Dean's first confrontation with Castiel, when the

angel reveals to Dean that God commanded that he be saved because Heaven has work for him. In this exchange (which, again, lasts for less than five minutes) the possible futures that might be borne of Dean's relationship with Castiel open up in every direction, effectively forcing the inflexible, predestined epistemologies of both the Biblical apocalypse and the Campbellian hero's journey into a narrative spiral animated and sustained by the friction between excessive reading and representation that matters: queerbaiting.

As the economies of attention that animate the convergence culture industry began to solidify, the emerging importance of paratext within the new modes of fan/producer engagement brought on by the social internet was becoming clear. As evidenced by the quotations from Misha Collins and (allegedly) Eric Kripke included above, "paratexts [...] from official sources, including [...] studio promotional materials, tie-in toys and games, and deleted scenes and producer commentary on DVD and Blu-ray releases" are essential to the networked and iterative fannish practices of excessive reading. Attending Collins' metaphorical courtship and marriage to *Supernatural*, there are plenty of examples of characters who transcended their initial narrative functions to take on lives of their own that have little to do with their romantic potentials.<sup>77</sup> Steve Urkel was only supposed to appear in a single episode of *Family Matters*. Jack Shephard, far from being the series protagonist, was supposed to die in the pilot episode of *Lost*.

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<sup>77</sup> It could be argued that all three of these examples feature characters whose romantic potentials are very important – albeit in markedly different ways. For all that the respective tones of Urkel's crush on Laura and Jack's tortured love triangle with Kate and Sawyer are seemingly miles apart, they still reassert the imperative of patriarchal heterotemporality by expressing heterosexual (and assumptively reproductive) desire by men for women. Castiel, because *Supernatural* has so few female characters of any continuing consequence, inherently does something different.

Hell, Kelsey Grammer spun a few episodes of Dr. Frasier Crane into eleven seasons of his own spinoff in addition to a promotion to series regular on *Cheers*. The fact that several notable creators of *Supernatural* seem to understand Cas' evolving role in the show as having something of a romantic vibe is precisely the kind of paratextual information that facilitates excessive reading – hence the quote attributed to Kripke that seems to exist on (and have been documented exclusively by) Tumblr and nowhere else.

Eve Ng's brilliant model for how the phenomenon works “presents [...] a schema for how a particular text comes to be seen as queerbaiting by at least some viewers” (Ng 2017). Integrating text, paratext, and context to demonstrate “the historical contingency of queerbaiting as emergent from intertextual readings of textual content and producer/viewer interactions during a particular period of LGBT media representation,” – which is to say, the emerging expectation of representation that matters – Ng demonstrates the complex and often unpredictable web of -textualities that give rise to such forestalled queer potentials as constantly plagued *Supernatural* up to and including Castiel's first and last love confession (Ng 2017). I have belabored the historical context from which Castiel emerged for precisely this reason, emphasizing the tectonic economic, sociopolitical, and technological shifts that necessitated rapid evolution in the economies of media attention while at the same time making the possibility of queer representation that matters newly imaginable. In the eleven seasons following the angel's introduction, the producers of *Supernatural* undoubtedly took advantage of the queer possibilities that emerge around Dean and Castiel, building in “many textual elements that invite viewers to read the characters' relationship as romantic, including each one's importance to the other, scenes of emotional intensity and physical intimacy, and the

failure of both to deny that they are a couple when other characters assume it” (Ng 2017). Indeed, as *Supernatural* entered into its post-Kripke era and continued to evolve beyond the show’s intended five season arc, the intensity of the relationship between Cas and Dean became a primary draw for many of *Supernatural*’s most committed fans.<sup>78</sup>

While the use of queer subtext in earlier genre television shows like the now-iconic *Xena: Warrior Princess* have generally come to be understood as “a step towards progress in terms of media representation of LGBTQ sexualities,” the thrill of such unspoken passions was evidently wearing thin as *Supernatural* continued to capitalize on manufactured moments of queer possibility without those moments ever resolving into representation that matters. In what Katherine Sender has called the “sensible business strategy” of “gay window dressing,” *Supernatural*’s showrunners seem to have responded to the shifts in an increasingly-unstable media landscape by attempting to have it both ways: “the relationship remains subtextual and producers don’t alienate conservative heterosexual viewers who can still view Dean as desirable and accessible, as well as leave the door (wide) open for fans’ increasingly popular practice of slash shipping” (Sender 1999; Collier 2015). Dean becomes something like Schrödinger’s (bisexual) cat and Castiel the subatomic particle of radioactive queerness that both does and does not decay:

“It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, *which can*

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<sup>78</sup> *Supernatural* fans typically orient themselves to the production of the show through allusion to the ‘eras’ of a given showrunner, of which there were five in total. More detailed accounts of the nuances that fans perceive within these different eras can be found in Giannini 2021.

*then be resolved by direct observation.* [...] There is a difference between a shaky or out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks” (Schrödinger 1935).

While fans insisted that what they were seeing – perfectly clearly – was one thing, producers could retreat to plausible deniability by refusing to resolve the indeterminacy through direct observation: representation that matters. In a concession to the received wisdom of a rapidly crumbling monoculture that deferred to the delicate (homophobic) sensibilities of the fabled ‘core audience,’ the writers and producers of *Supernatural* seemed to insist at first that fans’ queer reading of the text was shaky or out-of-focus: they were reading too much into it.

Given the notably conservative ideologies that undergird *Supernatural*’s storyworld, this reluctance to alienate that portion of the show’s audience is hardly surprising. Indeed, as Cassandra Collier observes:

“It is notable that moments in which other characters comment on [the nature of Dean and Cas’] relationship often occur as a brief glimpse of levity in an otherwise grave or urgent situation. The fact that these exchanges are moments of relief in tense scenes ultimately can be read as positioning same-sex relationships and queer identities as the punchline.”

And there is, sometimes, an echo of ‘no-homo’ to Dean in particular’s responses to these insinuations that hearken back to a pre-Hell version of the character, even as his bond with Castiel becomes ever-more-undeniably profound as the seasons progress. But Dean’s narrative circumstances would have been undeniably altered by his resurrection even if Castiel’s arc had only lasted for three episodes or if Dean had been returned from

the dead by some other means. The character's return from death irrevocably wrests him out of straight time, thereby solidifying Dean's inherent excessivity into an insistent queerness that, I argue, would have coalesced around some other narratively consequential homosocial bond for fans to read too much into. While it likely would have been with Sam – as for many fans it already is – the queer potentials of Wincest would not have caused the same kind of temporal contestation that resulted from Dean's relationship with Cas. As I've discussed above, the possibility that Sam and Dean are romantically involved is acknowledged frequently even within the text of the show only to be repudiated with the same kind of sly humor that Collier finds distasteful. "Teasing about a relationship and building a hefty subtext surrounding [it] without any explicit mention or confirmation reinforces the silence around queer identities," she says, "stigmatizing them and reinforcing hegemonic sexual norms" (2015). Put another way: queer utopian potentials and the real lived futures that they make imaginable are foreclosed upon by the reproductive, capitalistic restrictions of straight time both within the narrative and outside it.

#### You Can't Spell Subtext Without S-E-X

Collier's account of fan/producer contestations around the nature of Dean and Castiel's relationship locates the tension largely in the realm of the temporal. While fans could – and did – build increasingly robust arguments for why the romance between the hunter and the angel should finally be canonically acknowledged using evidence directly from the show itself, producers increasingly gained facility with the emerging elements

of the convergence culture that were beginning to industrialize fan/producer interactions – often with markedly gendered results. As Suzanne Scott argues, “misogyny within contemporary fan culture has flourished in part because the convergence culture industry has rendered fangirls an invisible or undesirable segment of the ‘fan’ market,” while “[t]he fanboy’s visibility is, in many cases, a byproduct of his compatibility with the more easily marketable or co-optable modes of fannish participation” (Scott 2018). While this is undoubtedly true for juggernaut fandoms like Star Wars or Marvel – both enormous transmedia franchises that have their roots in the comparatively less precarious, more instantiated film industry – the gendered dynamics of the attention economy for a weekly serialized television show like *Supernatural* would evolve very differently.

As the internet became increasingly integrated into daily social practices, the productive capacity of transformative fandom became its own kind of co-optable mode of fannish participation. Tumblr, in particular, proved particularly hospitable to the tentacular, rhizomatic, recursive and referential tendencies that had always been part and parcel of participatory fandom, but which could be made newly visible online through the public-facing social networks where fans began to congregate en masse. Tumblr, “a blogging site where users can post small messages in the form of text, photos, quotes, links, audio, and video,” became an engine that ran on content wherein fans could “analyze, and generally obsess over” their chosen texts and the attendant producerial paratexts that were increasingly cognizant of and tuned into fannish discourses. This resulted in a notably open and seemingly collaborative relationship between *Supernatural*’s fans and its producers, with the actors and crew cultivating “an air of accessibility” with their fans – assuming that those fans did not transgress certain

boundaries around the author-ity of the show's production team. In her consideration of several fan/producer interactions at conventions and on social media, Collier concludes that "[t]he producers and staff have indicated their awareness of slash but have trained the fandom to view it as a topic that should remain subtextual and not be directly or explicitly expressed to producers," thereby eliding accountability for the queerbaiting that became increasingly unsustainable as the show grew from a scrappy bubble show into a pop culture tentpole for millions of fans in America and around the world (Collier 2015). As "exceptionally savvy social media users," the *Supernatural* production team cultivated an encouraging and collaborative tone with their fandom that nevertheless rendered certain kinds of fannish investment – and the producorial accountability that they demand – literally unspeakable.

While I have thus far and will continue hereafter to address my analysis primarily to the fannish experience of *Supernatural*'s queer potentials, I do not want to disingenuously ascribe wholly malicious or cynical intent to the great many people who actually made the show. There is a propensity within much of the popular discourse around the *Supernatural*'s ultimate meaning to assume ill-intent on the part of producers, the possibility of which should not be discounted but which cannot fairly consider the uncharted waters that the show's creators – writers, actors, and crew – were navigating in real time as the social internet made communication with fans an increasingly integral part of their jobs. For all that the cast and crew of *Supernatural* seemed and *still* seem to have genuine affection for the show's fans, they were no more prepared for the ways in which the habituated boundaries of fan/producer interaction would shift as a consequence of the convergence culture than anyone else would have been in their position. Twitter

and Tumblr were as novel for the show's producers as they were for the show's viewers, after all, and the growing fannish demand for paratextual content coupled with the eagerness to share in the excitement and comradery of fandom must be taken into account when considering the evolving producorial line on appropriate fannish behavior. I want to once again emphasize that media producers are still media fans who have found themselves, with the rapid shifting of the sociocultural and political landscape, possessed of unprecedented public platforms that lent enormous import to their every offhand comment. While I do not intend to resort to the limp justification that "it was a different time," I do wish to offer empathy for the unprecedented situation in which the cast and crew found themselves as fannish investment in Dean and Castiel's relationship evolved from general acceptance of a comfortably subtextual inside joke into a public-facing argument for 'positive' representation for LGBT+ characters that had real economic and political force behind it.

There is no better example of the complex and often fraught dynamic between the producers and the fans – whose material investments of attention and time had saved *Supernatural* from cancellation on more than one occasion – than the show's 200th episode, which is aptly entitled "Fan Fiction." In true *Supernatural* fashion, the episode manages to toe the line between mockery and gratitude: respect for transformative fandom and the very real discomfort that it can generate co-exist in the episode with the same kind of qualified encouragement as had characterized fan/producer interactions for years by the time the episode aired on November 11, 2014. A 200th episode is a milestone for any television show, to be sure, but for a genre text like *Supernatural* to ascend beyond the precarity of its earliest seasons so magnificently is particularly

remarkable. And for all that the show offers plenty of opportunities to consider the narrative power imbalances inherent in the relationship between the show's fans and its writers – in fact, this episode provides several – “Fan Fiction” nevertheless reads like a love letter to the very fans whose emotional and economic investment had kept the show on the air for so long. It is an acknowledgement on the part of producers of the power of participatory fandom in all its queer excessivity that they explicitly attribute the show's longevity to transformative fans: not because they sent hot sauce or signed petitions, but because they took real ownership of the characters and story and – through their sustained and networked use of the social internet – built a new kind of fannish community in the process.

In the inciting incident of “Fan Fiction,” the doomed drama teacher whose death brings the Winchesters onto the scene haughtily proclaims that “Theatre [read: television] is about *truth!* Truth! Where's the truth in *Supernatural?*” before being mauled by one of the Greek Muses. So, yes; she may have a point there. But considering that the episode is explicitly *about* fannish interpretations of an extant popular media text – the very popular media text of which it is a part, in fact – this query works as an effective central question that the episode will proceed to explore. As Sam and Dean arrive at a private all-girls high school<sup>79</sup> to investigate the mysterious deaths surrounding a school play, they are

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<sup>79</sup> OKAY. So, I really might be reading too much into it here, but that's my job so here we go: this episode takes place in Flint, MI. When the Winchesters arrive at this very elite-looking private school, all of the people with whom they interact are women, and all of them are white. In Flint, MI. The water crisis in Flint is documented as having begun in April of 2014, while this episode aired in November of the same year. I do not necessarily suggest that the lack of narratively central characters of color on this episode of *Supernatural* was an intentional indictment of the irrepressible whiteness of many fannish spaces; such a lack of diversity in casting is not exactly atypical for the show. I do think, however, that the coincidence is interesting and merits acknowledgement.

confronted with a gleefully transformative account of their lives wherein they and all of their (largely male) compatriots are embodied by high school girls in truly horrendous wigs. Marie (Katie Sarife), a beret-ed and bespectacled auteur with a grand vision, is the director behind the no-budget creativity of *Supernatural: The Musical*. She is direct and decisive, erudite and ambitious – if rather shrewish and bossy and unsettlingly blunt – and confoundingly reads as both mocking caricature and admiring homage to the dedicated ‘fangirls’ who had been so instrumental in enabling the ‘official’ creators of *Supernatural* to make 200 episodes of the show. Marie is inarguably the protagonist of the episode’s primary storyline, and it is she who makes the choices that lead to the episode’s resolution. It is *because* of her, the episode implies, that the show – both the indexical musical and the show itself – must go on. That the show *does* go on. Sam and Dean are facilitators, guides, and allies (and in Sam’s case, the object of some transliterated lust) but Marie is in the driver’s seat while the Winchesters ride shotgun.

For this one episode, anyway.

And the episode’s energy *is* delightfully zany, living in and making a meal out of the sort of dizzy discomfort inherent in this splintering of what might be called the ‘hegemonic’ narrative of the Winchester brothers’ lives. Sam and Dean enter the auditorium to find that (to Sam’s bemused amusement and Dean’s incredulous horror) not only is the play that Marie has written about them, but that it is an original musical wherein ‘Dean’ begins the show by singing about what has happened on ‘The Road So Far’ in a high, clear soprano. Quite apart from the abundant opportunities for inside jokes and self-effacement for which the musical conceit allows – Marie’s libretto includes the song ‘A Single Man Tear’ that I mention in an earlier section – the episode allows

*Supernatural* to simultaneously harness the queer excesses and temporalities of musical theater without ever implicating their characters *directly* in that queerness. As Sarah Taylor Ellis observes, “song and dance – sites of aesthetic difference within the musical – can warp time and enable marginalized [...] fans to imagine different ways of being in the world,” just as I have argued is true for fans who read media texts excessively in search of the queer utopian horizon (Ellis 2013). It is no accident that neither Jared Padalecki nor Jensen Ackles ever sings a note in this episode, and yet the *characters* of Sam and Dean both belt it out like Broadway veterans. It is, always and essentially, the high school girls who give voice to the “excesses [that] have the potential to contest naturalized constructions of [...] progressive time” or, put another way, who read too much as a means of escaping straight time (2013). It is *they*, not the undercover and unidentified Sam and Dean, who are excessive – and yet their contextual excessivity is only possible *because of* Sam and Dean and the ‘lives’ that they have ‘lived’ throughout the previous 199 episodes. There is a curious recursivity to the whole enterprise: a retrospective on the story of *Supernatural* – both within the canonical narrative and outside it – undertaken with double-vision.

This double-vision manifests within the episode through the temporal rupture of direct address, with the metacommentary coming so fast and thick that there is almost no fourth wall to break. While there is only one instance in the episode wherein a character makes eye contact directly with the camera, all interactions between the Winchester brothers and the young women engaged in telling their story must count as direct address, since Marie and her compatriots are unambiguous stand-ins for the real fan communities to whom the episode is dedicated. Indeed, the fact that Marie’s version of *Supernatural* is

a stage show allows for the “inter-acknowledgement” of “the contact between actor and spectator common to theatre” in contrast to the “film performance [that] was recorded in a place and a time removed from the moment of its spectating” (Brown 2012). Even though this episode of television cannot completely emulate the ‘liveness’ of theater, the recontextualization of *Supernatural* and its protagonists through a theatrical rather than televisual lens does (somewhat) even the playing field for the contemplation of the episode’s central question: where is the truth in *Supernatural*?

As ever, Sam and Dean are oriented differently to the show’s internal temporalities even when those temporalities are in active contention. While former theater kid Sam kind of just wants to be included in the excitement and energy of the endeavor, Dean spends the majority of the episode expressing various volumes of affronted disbelief at everything from his doppelganger’s costume to the show’s non-existent production values (which Sam finds charming) and especially at Marie’s interpretation of the two most important relationships in his life. As *Supernatural*’s resident avatar of queer futurity, it makes perfect sense that it would be Dean’s perspective through which the producers elect to engage with the queerest and most excessive aspects of their transformative fandom more broadly, and with the practice of fanfiction in particular. Marie is not cowed by Dean’s vociferous affront but confidently stands by her interpretation of the material, meeting his every protest with a considered (if sometimes wacky) justification that radically recontextualizes what Dean thinks of as his autonomous, inviolate experiences that should be subject to his understanding alone. And yet, in Marie’s interpretation of their shared text – her *having read* about the things

that Dean *lived* – she unknowingly finds herself in the strange position of telling a fictional character things he doesn't know about the meaning of his own story.

While Dean never fully gets on board with many of Marie's priorities and opinions about the 'truth' of his life – and where is the truth in *Supernatural*, anyway? – the most interesting temporal ruptures in the episode revolve around Dean being confronted with his own (apparently obvious) queer potential. When Dean observes the drag king versions of himself and Sam in the midst of rehearsing the 'Boy Melodrama' scene, shot in loving and lingering detail by a camera that is in on the joke, there follows a textbook instance of the *Supernatural* writers explicitly consigning the queer erotics of Dean's relationship with his brother to the unrepresentable.

Dean, suspicious: Why are they standing so close together?

Marie, sly: Uh... reasons.

Dean, exasperated: You know they're *brothers*, right?

Marie, a teenager: Well duh. But... subtext.

Dean, not having it: (To 'Sam' and 'Dean') Why don't you take a substep back there, ladies?

With a comic musical stinger, Marie nods to her actors as they obligingly (and perhaps a little sheepishly) put half a cardboard Impala-length between them. Yet again: Wincest acknowledged. Wincest denied.

Having apparently convinced Marie to adjust the scene's blocking (at least until he isn't watching), Dean continues their verbal sparring session until he is once again distracted by a material representation of his own queer potential. Doing a double-take as he spies 'Dean' locked in a close embrace with another actor whose (really, truly terrible)

messy dark wig<sup>80</sup> is paired with a rumpled khaki trench coat and a pair of what appear to be modified children's-costume butterfly wings.

Dean, too abruptly: What are they doing?

(A pause.)

Marie, sarcastic: Um. Kids these days call it “hugging.”

Dean, suspicious: Is that in the show?

Marie: Oh. No, Siobhan and Kristen are a couple in real life.

Dean's expression is unreadable as he considers the two young women holding hands and smiling at each other, their faces very close together. But not, it must be said, all *that* much closer than the plentiful two-shots of Dean and Cas that fans have clipped directly from the show to live on as gifs on countless Tumblr dashboards.<sup>81</sup>

Marie, sly: Although we do explore the nature of Destiel in Act Two.

Dean, wary: Sorry – what?

Marie, airy: Oh, it's just subtext. (A pause.) But, then again, you know: you can't spell 'subtext' without S-E-X.

It is at this point that the fourth wall is well and truly broken, as Dean – or really, as Jensen Ackles, who is rather famously uncomfortable<sup>82</sup> with the queer readings of his

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<sup>80</sup> The funniest joke in the entire episode (and it's pretty funny if the call is coming from inside the house) is when Marie is suddenly called upon to play Sam, and dons the *world's worst wig* even though the character of Marie already has Sam Winchester's exact same haircut. It puts a button on the very trans energy of the episode with humor but no mockery and it makes me happy.

<sup>81</sup> GIFs are a technology of queer temporality that merit more concerted discussion than I have space for in this chapter that seems to be my own weird version of Purgatory because the more I write the more I find to say.

<sup>82</sup> This is another one of those strange consequences of the convergence culture and its influence on *Supernatural* and its cast and crew: Ackles and Padalecki are in essentially every single one of the show's more than 300 episodes when they initially signed up for a job that was supposed to last five years. I certainly can't blame Ackles for being unprepared to take on a responsibility that he didn't feel either

character – stares slack-jawed at Marie for several seconds before deliberately turning to face the camera head-on with an expression that can only be described as ‘Come on. Really?’

Dean’s unimpressed look to camera does not confirm or deny the ‘nature of Destiel’ that Marie explores in her ‘interpretation,’ but rather relegates the producorial response to the same subnarratable but unambiguous register in which Dean and Cas’ canonical romance seems likely to stay. Indeed, when it is revealed that Marie’s life is at stake if the show *doesn’t* go on (subtext and all), Dean seems possessed of the spirit of Calliope, the Muse of Epic Poetry and Eloquence... who is, incidentally, trying to consume Marie and all of the imagination and creative potential that her fandom gives her. In a rousing pre-curtain speech to the cast of young women in what amounts for Dean to biographical drag, he gives what is possibly the most eloquent version of the sentiment ‘You do you’ ever put to film:

Dean, apparently a soccer coach: Alright, listen up, girls. Now, I know you’re all here because you love *Supernatural* –

‘Mary Winchester’: Actually, I was hoping we’d do *Wicked*.<sup>83</sup>

Dean, considering: Yeah, that’d’ve been easier.

(A pause.)

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prepared or equipped for; he couldn’t have predicted what the introduction of Castiel would do to the show – and to his character – any more than anyone else could have.

<sup>83</sup>The writers largely avoid the trap of masturbatory self-congratulation that can be a hazard of metanarrative fiction by always giving the young women space to let the air out of Dean’s assumption of his own importance. Even when everything is literally about him, their wit and brutal honesty make it clear that their attachment (or lack of same) to this text is not really *about him*.

Dean, a bit awkward: Uh. I know I have expressed some differences of opinion regarding this particular version of *Supernatural*... uh. (Gaining confidence) But tonight, it is all about Marie's vision. This is *Marie's* "Supernatural." So I want you to get out there, and I want you to stand as close as she wants you to, and I want you to put as much sub into that text as you possibly can. There is no other road. No other way. No day... but today.

While some might argue that quoting *Rent* in your big speech about how anything queer about you is purely subtextual would be something of an oxymoron, Dean is, as the kids say, always gonna Dean. The character's queer gravity is such that there is even *too much* to be read into what, given Dean's general posture throughout the episode, seems to be a pretty unambiguous authorial repudiation of any canonical possibility for such queer subtext to eventually become text.

The tone of the episode is, as ever, grateful and teasing and encouraging, but nevertheless very clear around the boundaries between *Supernatural* and Marie's "Supernatural," even down to the closed-captioning that takes care to include the different formatting.<sup>84</sup> Which, by rules of etiquette that fans are continuously developing and renegotiating within online communities, might have sufficed in resolving the increasingly unsustainable tension between excessive reading and representation that matters that had plagued *Supernatural* for years. It is generally considered polite to 'ship and let ship' within fannish communities – although that rule seems to be broken as much

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<sup>84</sup> When Dean is referring to the 'canonical' version of *Supernatural*, i.e. his life, the subtitles are italicized. When he's talking about Marie's fannish interpretation, the show's name is in quotation marks. Shoutout to the Netflix captioner for that smart little interpretive detail.

as it is respected – and many fans seem to have been content to accept the offered detente with grace. It might be disappointing to hear that the queer potentials in which they were so invested would never come to matter in the canon of the show, but the fans to whom ‘Fan Fiction’ is so clearly addressed were largely just as invested in their dynamic and interlocutory relationship as the show’s creative team. Had *Supernatural* continued to abide by the rules of engagement that the show sets in “Fan Fiction,” perhaps the show might have avoided the fallout of ‘Destielgate’ that has begun to fix the show, as endings tend to do, within the emerging history and ongoing theorization of queerbaiting in both fandom spaces and in the academy.

#### Moment(s) of Perfect Happiness

In the wake of Dean’s speech to Marie and her implied compatriots in the here-and-now, it seemed as though fans and producers came to something of a detente. Of course, as Collier and others have ably considered, the power dynamics of this understanding are undeniably exploitative, with producers relying on fannish investments in the story and its characters while still retaining ultimate control over those characters and their fates. This is the irreconcilable tension of *Supernatural* as an emblematic text of the convergence culture industry: the financial imperatives of the serialized cable television economy would always commodify the ostensibly ‘collaborative’ relationship between fans and producers, however affectionate, and would always smack of exploitation – of the denial of imaginable futures not only to Dean and Castiel, but to all of those for whom the characters provided tangible glimpses of the queer utopian

horizon. As *Supernatural* left the 200th episode in the rearview mirror, fans enthusiastically obeyed Dean's instruction to put as much sub into the text as they possibly could.

Dean's speech certainly can be read as dismissive of the queer attachments that fans had to *Supernatural* and the progressive political imperative of representation that matters that often attended those attachments. Considering the apocalyptically-inflected fallout of Castiel's love confession/martyr monologue in the here-and-now, it is certainly possible that the showrunners miscalculated in predicting their fans' reaction to the long-awaited confirmation – at least on Castiel's part – of his canonical love for Dean. The intricacies of the excessive reading practices that I have ascribed to transformational fandom are vast and complex, networked and layered in intricate polysemy and intertextuality, and have evolved throughout the first two decades of the social internet to be incredibly unpredictable.<sup>85</sup> Outraged fannish responses to unpopular authorial choices are nothing new – Arthur Conan Doyle is probably still getting snubbed in the hereafter – but, as always, the creators of *Supernatural* were in uncharted waters as they contemplated bringing the show to a close. Not only had *Supernatural* outlived its original story; it had exceeded all expectations and historical precedent for any show of its genre.<sup>86</sup> Though, as I have said, I do not wish to elide the real hurt and frustration that *Supernatural*'s fans felt at Castiel's 'bury your gays speedrun,' I will once again assert

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<sup>85</sup> Red pill blue pill QAnon as fandom blah blah blah I'll see you in Chapter 3 for more on this.

<sup>86</sup> While *Doctor Who* does hold the distinction of being the longest running SF/fantasy television show in the world, the level of difficulty for *Supernatural*, which was the product of an American cable television network rather than a nationalized broadcaster, is to my mind higher.

that the interlocutory relationship that developed between *Supernatural*'s producers and their fans was in some crucial ways a generous one rather than deliberately malicious.

Because, while the conversation around queerbaiting has typically focused on the outcomes for fans, *Supernatural* provides an exceptionally interesting case study into the long-term narrative consequences of prolonged exposure between media producers and their fans for the *producers*. Because, quite the opposite of proving to be merely a dismissive one-off – a misguided presumption from producers that fans might need their permission to read too much – this moment of queer temporal rupture in “Fan Fiction” does, in fact, mark the beginning of an important shift for the characterization of Dean Winchester. Though he retains much of the hyperbolically masculine swagger and roughness that were essential to his character, the endless grind of his here-and-now of violence and cosmic power struggles begin to palpably wear on Dean. Saving people, hunting things: the family business... but with ever-rising narrative stakes wherein the writers continuously had no choice but to make the Biblical apocalypse look like small potatoes. Indeed, as one apocalypse begat another, it seemed that every time the Winchester brothers caught a glimpse of that fabled Hero's Return, they'd inevitably – and usually instantly – be forced to heed the Call to Adventure once again, to kill and fight and lose people – for Dean to lose *Castiel* – all over again. It begins to feel, for fans who had by this point been invested with the characters for as long as a decade, like torture.

And herein, I contend, is the ultimate brilliance of *Supernatural* as an emblematic text of the convergence culture industry. Because the people who had been invested in the characters for a decade also included the innumerable creative professionals who

made *Supernatural*, who considered their fans to be an inextricable part of the show's trajectory, the show began to reckon with its own ending with classic metatextual and self-referential panache. As Sam and Dean neared forty, as Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles wanted to pursue other creative challenges, as the whole world changed in the span of a mere decade, the show would of course, inevitably, have to end. But rather than merely keeping the Winchester brothers trapped forever in the same story for which they'd been conceived – the “*Star Wars* in Truck Stop America” of Kripke's 2004 pitch – the producers made their show *about* that endless grind. In the 127 episodes that the producers of *Supernatural* made following “Fan Fiction,” they made a show that is specifically *about* what it takes to escape from that hero's journey: about what it costs when every single one of the hero's thousand faces is yours. In *Supernatural*'s own clever, sideways way, the plot of the show itself becomes about the prison of straight time: about being trained from birth to walk in lockstep with the beat of a drum so vanishingly distant that you're no longer sure you can hear it. About the kind of bravery it takes to stop being brave – to not keep calm and carry on, to stop pulling yourself up by your bootstraps – and to want more for yourself than the painful, punishing slog of what you've always known. By the time it is revealed that it was God<sup>87</sup> pulling the strings the entire time, and that Sam and Dean *have been* trapped in endless narrative torture by a sadistic creator who is both fan and producer at once, it hardly seems surprising – even to the brothers themselves.

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<sup>87</sup> God's name is Chuck, by the way. He's the writer of *The Winchester Gospels* – or the in-universe series of pulp novels based on Sam and Dean's life. It's a very Stephen King kind of move, and just as obnoxious.

What *is* unexpected, at least from an understanding of queerbaiting that relies upon a mercenary economic view of producorial power, is how the brothers – and particularly Dean – reconcile with the fallout of this coming-to-consciousness. After a lifetime indebted to the violent, patriarchal masculinity of his upbringing, Dean finally begins to question everything he thought he knew about himself. Finding himself living constantly with the vertiginous double-vision induced by Marie’s play, Dean becomes ever-more attuned to the temporal queerness of his life, past, and (eventually) even his feelings. The Winchesters spend a lot of time in both the imminent lead-up to and in the aftermath of the revelation that they are trapped in a story manipulated by God doing retrospective meaning-making about their own experiences. Dean, whose dialogue had always been characterized by highly referential pop culture knowledge through which he drew analogues to his and Sam’s adventures, is particularly adept at this. His facility with narrative meaning-making puts him in the uncomfortable position of being able to read too much into the events of his own life – even as they are occurring. It is almost as though, in his interactions with Marie and her transformative fiction, Dean Winchester *himself* becomes increasingly adept with the practice of reading too much into things. Which is, not incidentally, a fairly common outcome for fans discovering the form as well.

For Dean, the revelation that he has been tantamount to a fictional character this whole time requires that he must read too much into his actions as a matter of survival and, in a very real way, to finally gain true freedom of choice for the first time in his life. In order to imagine a future *at all*, Dean must, as Muñoz says, distill the past and use it to create one. Basically, Dean Winchester kind of goes to narrative therapy to try to outgrow

the *straight*-jacket of toxic masculinity that has trapped him since he was a child. At one point he *literally* goes to therapy, although that's because of a homicidal shape-shifter. Indeed, there is a marked and noticeable shift in *all* of the characters' emotional intelligence as *Supernatural* advanced into its later seasons. Given that the producers had never been particularly squeamish about using diegetic metatextuality to speak directly to fans through them, it should probably not be surprising that the canonical iterations of the Winchesters should have reciprocally developed qualities that spoke to fannish investments even outside of shipping culture. Though I've read enough fanfiction wherein the brothers come to grips with their violent pasts and unhappy childhoods, I will admit that the first time that I heard Sam Winchester say *out loud* that ignoring your trauma does not mean it doesn't exist shocked me into an audible reaction not dissimilar to the "manifestation of utopian feeling" signified by the fangirl's 'squee' (Muñoz 2009). It turns out, hearing the Winchester brothers spout therapy language in the middle of a monster hunt is just as gratifying as I'd ever hoped it would be.

In fact, for a show that began its life as a bastion of American working-class masculinity and the limited temporalities of Campbellian heroics, *Supernatural* had evolved by its final season into a deconstruction of toxic masculinity and the weighty consequences of saving others at the expense of your own happiness. As it became increasingly clear that the show would get the vanishingly rare opportunity to end on its own terms, the Winchesters began to look backwards and inwards in their attempts to make meaning of their own lives – of their story. Of course, the show is still itself, and so this nascent interiority comes attached to all of the external signifiers of *Supernatural*'s bombastic and byzantine narrative style: the Winchester brothers have unresolved

mommy issues? Have a cosmic entity (this one's called The Darkness) resurrect Mary Winchester so that they can deal with them. The show got heat from fans and journalists for indulging in 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' with the character of Charlie Bradbury? Surprise! Here's a Charlie from an alternate dimension with whom Sam and Dean can do some processing around that. Literally *every single one* of these men needs to come to grips with their messy and complicated relationships with their own absent and neglectful fathers? Easy. Turn the rebellious sons into fathers themselves by having Cas, Dean, and Sam collectively co-parent the literal son of Satan, and let the healing begin.

And here is where the orienting temporal logics of representation that matters begin to really break down. Because of how queer online fandom has emerged given the affordances of the convergence culture industry brought about by the social internet, it is still fundamentally beholden in some crucial ways to the instantiating impulses of representation that matters within the prison house of the here and now. Gifs, for example, or the YouTube compilation videos that I have mentioned before in reference to Dean and Castiel's representable relationship, rely upon moments that have *already happened* for their coherence. The queerness that fans have the access to apprehend and read has always, inevitably, already happened as much as it is not yet here. The emerging definition of queerbaiting, which is, to reiterate, historically co-emergent with *Supernatural*, relies upon the temporal stasis of the present.

And the thing is: those moments of queer possibility do not fade as the show nears its conclusion. They get queerer. Because – and again, I know nothing of authorial intent nor can I account for the thinking or direction behind Jensen Ackles' acting choices – it becomes increasingly clear that Dean might not be *saying* that he loves Castiel, but that

doesn't mean that that love isn't felt. Indeed, with everything from the score to the lighting to the camerawork and the dialogue of the characters around him, *Supernatural* makes it clear when Dean is grasping toward an imagined queer future in which he *will* be able to speak that unspeakable thing. In these moments of aesthetic ecstasy that are "marked by both self-consciousness and obliviousness" for Dean, he can grapple with the "affective results of being outside of straight time" that include the "feelings of nervousness and fear" of being trapped, with no autonomy, within the preordained narrative of the monomyth (Muñoz 2009). Indeed, with every glimpse of the always-coming-never-arriving horizon that yields queer possibility *for fans* within the text, it increasingly seems that Dean is experiencing them too.

As for Castiel, whose own coming-to-consciousness is no less interesting than Dean's for all that it happens earlier: his function within the narrative of *Supernatural* may have evolved over the course of eleven seasons, but his effect for Dean's access to queer utopian feeling does not. Though it is true that the last several seasons of *Supernatural* have so many characters and plot-points that kept Dean and Cas from interacting with any consistency, that had always sort of been true of Castiel's relationship to the Winchesters. His angelic capabilities and expository utility keep the mechanics of the plot turning even when he and Dean are not interacting directly, which I posit is at least in part a producorial strategy to delimit the accusations of queerbaiting that had plagued the show for years. However, as he is in "Lazarus Rising," Castiel remains a looming, powerful presence in Dean's story even when he remains unseen. His intrinsic excessivity brings forth Dean's in their every interaction, to such an extent that it can have been nothing less but deliberate. The writing begins to develop and expand

upon oblique references to Dean's feelings for Cas and vice versa, as though they are an open secret the confirmation and exploration of which must always take a back seat to whatever apocalypse they need to fend off that day. Structurally, by working together to stave off the end of the world, Dean and Cas *do* become textually queer: the here and now might be a prison house, but Dean and Cas must – and do – constantly strive “in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there.” In order for queerness to be *felt*, to really matter for a *whole person* and not a fictional character, it does not *need* to be spoken to exist. It *already* exists, even before the words are uttered. The happy ending, as Castiel discovers in his final representable moments before being sucked back into The Empty, is just in the being.

I am not by any means suggesting that fans who had invested so much feeling and time and enthusiasm into Cas and Dean's relationship should just have been happy with what they got. Nor am I arguing that the producers of *Supernatural* were not at least a little mercenary in curtailing the representable queer possibility between their characters in the hopes of sustaining their show's longevity. Both of these things are observably true, in fact. Fans who looked to *Supernatural*'s concluding chapters for a happy ending for Dean and Castiel – for a mutual exchange of ‘I love yous’ instead of a tragic and truncated ‘bury your gays’ – did deserve to have those feelings witnessed. And for some of them, Cas' confession was enough. Again, the “honest relief” of “being able to just say [it] out loud” was for many fans “actually astounding.” And for some, it didn't matter that they could say it out loud, because at the end of the day – at the end of the *show* – Dean never could.

## Carry On

As evidenced by the language of ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’ and ‘bury your gays’ that I have used frequently to allude to fannish critiques of LGBT+ media representation, the fact that both Dean and Cas die in the denouement of *Supernatural* inevitably contextualizes both characters within a long and violent history that has sought to eradicate queer feeling from the realm of the representable or the speakable. The fact that there is a direct causal relationship between Castiel’s love for Dean and his ostensibly irreversible subsumption into nothingness doesn’t help, nor does the fact that Dean’s hard-won happily ever after is seemingly cut short by rebar and writers. Because Castiel’s deathbed confession, for all that it precipitated a decidedly queer temporal rupture in our own here and now, is not the end of the show. After Cas has been taken to The Empty, there are two more episodes of *Supernatural* yet to go.

As things in the plot get wrapped up in the show’s penultimate episode (the Winchester men having become such capable fathers that their kid literally becomes God and fixes the universe), the series’ final episode, “Carry On,” resolves the relationship that had animated that original heroes’ journey and all the ones that came after: “the epic love story of Sam and Dean.” As ever, the brothers’ temporal orientations to their story are markedly different, which is conclusively affirmed by their ultimate narrative fates. It might be a decade late, but Sam and Dean finally do get to experience the Campbellian Hero’s Return... for real, this time. In the spirit of excessive reading with which I began this chapter, I will close with the last eponymous ride of these wayward sons. Both Sam

and Dean, though in characteristically disparate temporal fashion, do get peace when they are done.

The episode begins, as so many other episodes of *Supernatural* have, with the brothers treading the familiar narrative path of the hunt: identify, track, pursue, kill. There's a nest of vampire mimes holed up in an abandoned barn, a classic monster-of-the-week antagonist straight out of the show's earliest seasons. Sam and Dean must eradicate them in order to abide by that old imperative to save people and hunt things. The brothers, it seems, have merely returned (as they always had) to the family business; it is not so much a future as a narrative seemingly pulled out of Sam and Dean's simpler past. If this was the happy ending we were waiting for, say the mime vampires who seem more built for humor than horror, then what was it all for? There is a palpable sense of irresolution about the scene when Sam and Dean casually bust through the doors as the mythic, cosmic warriors that they have become rather than the kids that they – both the brothers Winchester and the men who had embodied them for so long – had once been. The hunt should be easy. It *is* easy, as the brothers fight like a well-oiled machine and the similarly skilled mechanics of the tv show *Supernatural* – the camera and the stunt choreography and the light design and the sound – spin around them. The well-trodden steps of the fight scene dance along in easy familiarity until one of the mime-pires shoves Dean back and directly onto a spike of rebar protruding from the barn's crumbling supports. And in the end, it is an accident – a stupid, meaningless fluke – that kills Dean Winchester for good.

As he speaks his dying words to Sam, Dean reaffirms the brothers' different orientations to the straight temporalities of the happy ending one final time. He tells Sam

that it was always going to end this way for him, and they both knew it. He makes Sam promise not to bring him back from the dead because “that always ends bad.” He tells Sam that he’s proud of him, that he loves him, that it really is okay. It’s as much as Dean has *ever* voluntarily spoken his feelings out loud, and in the end, if there was ever a person to whom Dean Winchester – avatar of queer futurity par excellence – *could* finally find the words to speak a heartfelt love confession a la Castiel, it would be to his brother, and it would be at the end of their story. Dean’s dying words to his brother emphasize the *speakability* of the bond that they share: a bond that has, no matter what other narrative forces evolved along the way, always been the heart of the story. Far from being unrepresentable, this fraternal love between Dean and Sam is *fundamental*.

Dean: ... Hey, did I ever tell you, that night that I came for you when you were at school? You know, when Dad hadn’t come back from his hunting trip?

Sam: Yeah. The woman in white.

Dean: The woman in white, that’s right. I must have stood outside your dorm for hours, because I didn’t know what you would say. I thought you’d tell me to – to get lost. Or get dead. And I didn’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have you. Because I was so scared. I was so scared. ‘Cause when it all came down to it, it was always you and me. It’s *always* been *you* ... and *me*.

The emphasis and pauses that I have included here are there within the scene, with Ackles’ delivery emphasizing the centrality of love to *this* story, which has been more sustainably representable than any other of its kind in the history of genre television. Though everything about the filming and post-production of this scene makes it clear that this is a love confession, opening up myriad opportunities for polysemic interpretations

of the scene that Wincest shippers could continue to indulge in, the tone and language of Dean's confession becomes increasingly familial as his speech progresses.

Sam, pleading: Then don't leave me. Don't leave me. I can't do this alone.

Dean, certain: Yes you can.

Sam, still fighting: Well, I don't want to.

Dean, commanding Sam's attention: Hey. I'm not leaving you. I'm gonna be with you right here every day. Every day you're out there and you're living, and you're fighting. Because you? You always keep fighting. Do you hear me? I'll be there every step. I love you so much. My baby brother.

Herein the music holds and swells as Sam's face collapses, his habitual future-oriented and solutions-based instincts having finally collapsed into wracking sobs as he is faced with the consequence of Dean recounting their story's beginning: that story will, eventually, end. And Sam Winchester, always inevitably the lone straight man, will be the one to see it all the way through. Dean's insistence that he will always be with Sam speaks to a more ephemeral orientation to ending, one that becomes solidified later in the episode as Dean is interpolated into Sam's *particular* straight temporality when Sam names his only son after his brother.<sup>88</sup> As Dean begins to visibly weaken, his speech choppy and his eyes unfocused, he is nearing the point at which he will, as the song says, lay his weary head to rest and finally cry no more. Because there is no Single Man Tear here, there are streams of them.

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<sup>88</sup> As good a dad as Sam Winchester proves himself to be during his interactions with Jack throughout the series, there is no way that Dean the kid didn't grow up with a complex. The Winchester Patrilineage of Perpetual Daddy Issues endures.

Dean, still mostly lucid: Man, I did not think this would be the day. But it is. It is. And that's okay. But I need you to promise me. I need you to tell me that it's okay. I need you to tell me that it's okay.

Here Dean devolves into increasingly inarticulate pleas for Sam to allow him to let go, fading quickly as Sam visibly steels himself for what he must say next:

Sam, breaking: Dean, it's okay. It's okay. You can go now.

Dean's face relaxes. His smile broadens as his eyes close, a look of serenity falling over his features as he sags against Sam in relief. Sam, pressing his forehead to Dean's, holds him up as Dean says goodbye a final time before going limp in his brother's arms.

There follows an account of Sam's days immediately following Dean's death, including Dean's pyre cremation and all of those responsibilities that are pulling him inexorably onward into the future as Sam obeys Dean's final command that he always keep fighting. And although Sam continues on into the future, the narrative does a tight loop to follow Dean from the moment that Sam lights his pyre ablaze. Dean comes-to in the midst of a peaceful, sunlit afternoon in a valley surrounded by still green mountains. Far from being confused or afraid, Dean understands immediately that "at least [he's] made it to Heaven." This Dean has, after all, wandered off the cyclical road of the monomyth many times before into other dimensions and universes that the Dean of Kripke's 2004 pitch could not have even imagined. Through the singular and irreplicable creative convergence between fans and producers over the course of *Supernatural's* run, Dean has become something more than a fictional archetype or a narrative signifier of political progress. Miles and years away from the "troublemaker" to Sam's "good kid" whose "cocky confidence mask[s] a troubled soul," standing firm beyond the unsteady

narrative ground of bisexual representation either positive or problematic, Dean can finally rise above the noise and confusion of his narrative significations and put-on identities to get a glimpse beyond the illusion of straight time at the queer horizon that stretches out in every direction around him.

As for Castiel, ostensibly trapped forever in an endless void of non-existence – of representation that literally could not matter any less – he is, as he was from his inception, a powerful but as-yet-unspoken presence in the scene as Dean is once again reborn, his profound bond with Cas having once more raised him from perdition. Just as he did when he clawed himself from his grave in “Lazarus Rising,” Dean must here be witnessed by another in order to once again reorient himself to the temporality of this new world. And, just as he did at that long-ago time, Bobby is there to witness him. The difference is that this world is Heaven; and not the bureaucratic, hierarchical Heaven that had been Dean’s frequent enemy in the here and now of the storyworld. Bobby explains everything to Dean in an echo of the exposition dump that the two once shared in his kitchen, after establishing, as he did then, that Dean is actually himself – and actually alive on the first page of an entirely new story:

Bobby: That kid of yours [...] made some changes here. [...] Well, he set some things right. Tore down all the walls up here. Heaven ain’t just reliving your golden oldies anymore. It’s what it always shoulda been: everyone happy, everyone together. [...] It ain’t just Heaven, Dean. It’s the Heaven you *deserve*. And we’ve been waiting for you.

Dean and his chosen father share a beer, finally free of all the compounded pain of the hero’s thousand journeys. Finally – or perhaps infinitely – allowed to “see and feel

beyond the quagmire of the present” in which he had been stuck both within the narrative and beyond it, Dean huffs a wondering breath.

Dean: So Jack did all that, huh?

Bobby: Well ... (a pointed pause) Cas helped.

There really is no *need* for words to confirm the ‘canonicity’ of Dean’s small smile as he cuts his gaze away from Bobby’s meaningfully raised eyebrows, no Russo Test that could quantify the disbelieving little chuckle as he learns that Cas, unseen but not unknown or unnamed this time, has helped the child they raised together to create this then and there where there are no endings, only infinite possible new beginnings stretching out in every direction toward the horizon. And Bobby assures Dean, as he tells him that Sam will join him soon, that the temporality of this new world will be like nothing Dean has yet experienced. “Time up here,” Bobby says. “It’s... it’s different. You got everything you could ever want or need or dream. So I guess the question is ... what are you gonna do now, Dean?” And because Dean is himself, whole and unburdened and able at last to choose freely, he says: “I think I’ll go for a drive.”

And this is where the narrative leaves him, the Impala gleaming in the sunlight as Dean speeds down endless wandering roads with no destination preordained, no obligations beyond his own desire. As Kansas exhorts him a final time to carry on, wayward son... Dean does. In this world where time moves differently, the road so far dissolves seamlessly into the road ahead for a fictional character who now *canonically exists* beyond and outside of his own canonical story. As Dean finally brings the Impala to a rumbling halt in the middle of the bridge that spans a great canyon below, he is once again joined by Sam – who has been living a full and happy life during the time it has

taken Dean to go for a meandering, aimless afternoon drive. The brothers stand in the center of the bridge, shoulder to shoulder, smiling out together at whatever comes next, their eyes to the horizon. But just as quickly as the camera pulls back and away over Sam and Dean Winchester bridging the expanse between the world that's ended and the worlds that have yet to be imagined, it refocuses again on Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, who address the camera in a final dedicatory message.

Ackles: Thank you, the fans. Through blood, sweat, laughter, and tears, you've kept us on for 15 years.

Padalecki: There's no way we would have ever been here without you and your support and your love, so thank you. We will remain forever grateful for the opportunity and the honor to play these characters for so long, and we felt you guys with us here all the time. So thank you.

The actors walk forward to join with dozens of members of both cast and crew, all of them standing together in the middle of that same bridge as the camera once again pulls out and away.

It is a powerful visual reminder that *Supernatural* was, as every popular media narrative is, a fundamentally collaborative endeavor. And, in giving this final acknowledgement to the show's fans, the producers of the show explicitly acknowledge them as co-authors in this unique thing that never could have existed before it did and will never exist in the same way again. *Supernatural* is a real-time record of the evolution of the convergence culture industry and the shifting temporal contestations between the here and now of the representable world and the then and there of queer futurity. It is a profoundly complex web of economic and affective and technological forces that

converged in exactly the right way and at exactly the right time to yield a canonical text that both defies and embodies queer utopian imagination.

Dean's ending in particular is, I contend, what makes *Supernatural* so singular within the history of the convergence culture and the ongoing friction between the temporally-unruly practice of reading too much into it and the progressive imperative of representation that matters. Because Dean, avatar of queer futurity par excellence, literally could not *have* a happy ending that did not in some way include Castiel for so many of the fans to whom such representation would matter so much. Though I do not contend here that the showrunners were deliberately and maliciously queerbaiting right up until Dean's final breath – quite the opposite – it is undeniable that *Supernatural* would never have reached its 15 season finale without having fomented queer feeling among its queer fanbase only to have the representable resolution to that queer feeling repeatedly denied. And so: is *Supernatural* guilty of queerbaiting? Emphatically yes. Do I believe that it could ever have evolved into the astonishing meditation on the nature of queer possibility that is heralded by Dean's small smile and the powerful unseen presence of Castiel in this Heaven he deserves? Just as emphatically, I do not.

*Supernatural*, in living past its story through the powerful pull of queer fannish reading, becomes a text that reads too much into *itself* – and only then, with characteristic queerness, can evolve into infinite new futures for Dean and Castiel in which they can finally speak their representation into mattering. It is a canonical text wherein the end of the story does not foreclose queer possibility by resorting to the instantiating logics of the here and now, but rather concludes its singular and inimitable trajectory by ensuring that the happiest ending possible is all possible endings. It is a strange, recursive, unruly

primary document that bridges the gap between the end of one world and the beginning of the next. It is canon that is fanfiction that is canon that is fanfiction again. It is a narrative born deeply rooted in the “linearity of straight time” that, through the unpredictable forces of the convergence culture industry, evolved at last into a queer utopian ideality wherein it is possible – no, *necessary* – to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz 2009). And Dean, now able to see the queer horizon stretching out around him beyond the end of the world he saved, gets to live in them all. But then; he always did. That’s what fanfiction is for.

## Chapter 4

### Til The End of the Line:

#### Excessivity and the Endgame in The Marvel Cinematic Universe

*“The thing is: to be American means knowing you’re the hero. So what do we do? We sweep all our filthy shit under the rug and we tell ourselves a myth like Soldier Boy. And*

*I get stinking rich selling it.”*

*– The Legend (SVP: Hero Management)*

*The Boys 3.7*

### Incorporating Convergence

The third season of Amazon Studios’ adaptation of *The Boys* finds the characters embroiled in a dystopian hellscape of late-stage capitalism, of corporate consolidation and political doublespeak and a burgeoning geopolitical arms race fueled by the fear and rage of a very few powerful men with breathtaking anger management issues.

It isn’t a documentary though.

Set “in a world where costumed heroes soar through the sky and masked vigilantes prowl the night,” Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson’s comic series was published serially from 2006 - 2012, and the streaming adaptation – executive produced by Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogan – was picked up by Amazon Studios in 2017.

Gleefully irreverent and full of the most graphic kinds of physical and psychological violence, *The Boys* – both the literary and the televisual iterations – runs much more to the *Watchmen* strain of the superhero genre as social commentary than it does to the more common variants that have become endemic within the contemporary American media environment.<sup>89</sup> And yet, the show seems to have hit a cultural nerve, with its viewership numbers rising steadily with each new batch of episodes. In a fascinatingly succinct instantiation of attention as a chief commodity of the convergence culture industry, Nielsen has reported that the second season of *The Boys* had been streamed for a total of 4.8 billion minutes within six weeks, with the figure rising to 10.6 billion minutes for the third season (Rudoy 2023). Enthusiastically received by both critics and audiences alike, *The Boys* may very well mark an imminent sea change in America’s relationship with the oversaturated genre of superhero media; the show outperformed all of its formidable competition from the two industrial pillars of the genre – Marvel and DC – to become “the most popular superhero show on streaming for 2022” (Dick 2023).

In the spirit of excessive reading with which I approach this project and with apologies to Sherlock Holmes, there are several features of interest, even this very brief account of the show’s development. First, the very *existence* of such an entity as Amazon Studios speaks to the radical shifts that global media economies have undergone during the first decades of the 21st century and the inscrutable, tentacular corporate affinities that have emerged as a result. While *The Boys* is pointedly critical of the mercenary corporatization of public life through its portrayal of the sinister “multi-billion dollar

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<sup>89</sup> Not that superheroes aren’t always social commentary, of course.

superhero entertainment conglomerate” Vought International, the digs that the show takes at what has become an increasingly thinly-veiled analog for The Walt Disney Company can’t help but ring a little hollow in the wake of a global pandemic during which Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos became the first person ever to be worth more than \$200 billion. Indeed, the company’s very name conjures up its own sense of dystopian dread complete with rocket ships and doomsday bunkers and armies of smiling, anonymous blue vans that would have been anything but commonplace when Ennis and Robertson published their first issues in 2006, only one year after the launch of Amazon Prime.

The second conclusion is, in fundamental ways, corollary to the first. In the economy of commodified audience attention that has come to characterize popular media consumption of the post-convergence, the acquisitive strategies of a powerful player like Amazon merit deliberate consideration. In addition to *The Boys*, Amazon’s production slate is replete with other high-budget adaptations of beloved genre properties including *The Wheel of Time*, *Good Omens*, and (for better or worse) *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. Where the prevailing image of genre media fandom in the earliest days of fan studies located such properties and their audiences at the fringes of mainstream popularity – often the narrative objects of ridicule and censure – Amazon’s willingness to spend upwards of \$11 million per episode of *The Boys* or an astonishing<sup>90</sup> \$60 million per episode of *The Rings of Power* rather bluntly “reflect[s] the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday life” (Grey et al 2007). The geeks have well and truly inherited the earth.

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<sup>90</sup> And unambiguously evil.

In short: *The Boys* only exists as a product of the digital media convergence, which “represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content,” and from its subsequent – and ongoing – industrialization (Jenkins 2006). From its funding to its production to the visual and narrative echoes and rhymes that make the show particularly rich territory for intertextual analysis, *The Boys* is a uniquely illustrative example of the ways in which “the development of digital technologies [...] necessitated the media industries’ move from a prohibitionist to a more collaborationist stance toward fandom and participatory culture” (Scott 2019). Fans, after all, “have always been highly commoditized and commodity-driven consumers,” and as the shifting affordances of digital media have increasingly commoditized sustained audience attention – fandom as a structure of everyday life – it follows that the media genres that have historically invited fannish attachment would be commensurately impacted. The idea that superhero stories have become so ubiquitous as to constitute a safe economic bet is certainly a relatively new one in the history of the genre, an investment in which was at one point pretty clear narrative shorthand for ‘adult virgin who lives in his mom’s basement.’ This association between failed (masculine) heterosexuality and nerd culture is to say nothing of the moral panic that precipitated the formation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 or the promulgation of said moral panic that has reemerged at moments of temporal uncertainty throughout the intervening decades.<sup>91</sup> That an X-rated satire about the enormous

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<sup>91</sup> I am thinking in particular of the so-called Satanic Panic of the mid-1980s, which emerged around the imagined space of the comic shop as the devil’s playground amidst the ostensible end of the Cold War. Like the sharp swing to cultural conservatism in the post-War years, this generalized suspicion around comic books emerges at yet another cultural moment of temporal rupture wherein normative boundaries must be reinforced in order to safeguard a future that is always already the same as the present.

sociopolitical impact of superheroes might ever be as successful as *The Boys* continues to be speaks to the “seismic shifts in media culture” heralded by the “emergent technologies [that] were shaping industrial practices in the [...] early 2000s” (Scott 2019).

While both of the texts that I have previously considered might be characterized as being *of* the convergence – having developed in and adapted to the shifting and unpredictable media environment of the late 2000s and early 2010s – *The Boys* is a post-convergence text. It is an industrialized product in every regard, from its concept to its content. A “multi-billion dollar superhero entertainment conglomerate” that is also a primary purveyor of American cultural imperialism that is also a sociocultural inflection point for political extremism that is also a family-friendly purveyor of ‘progressive ideals’ and ‘diversity,’ Vought International works as a remarkably malleable analog for the real-world development of the superhero industrial complex in which we are all still embroiled.<sup>92</sup> In particular, *The Boys* thrives in the rhizomatic webs of “collective meaning-making within popular culture” that Henry Jenkins proclaimed was “starting to change the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising, and even the military operate” as early as 2006 (Jenkins 2006). This phenomenon that Jenkins theorizes as collective intelligence can be summarized thusly:

Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume. This conversation creates buzz that is increasingly valued by the media industry. Consumption has become a collective process [...]. None of us

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<sup>92</sup> The superhero bubble is absolutely deflating, but it’s not popping so much as it’s going out like a whoopee cushion. It is, as the Tik-Tok kids say, Morbin’ time.

can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power.

Of course, Jenkins' concept of the convergence culture has been productively complicated and nuanced in the years since he coined the term, but this figuration of collective intelligence is borne out constantly in the secondary economies of fandom that have developed alongside the media industries that support them. Indeed, I submit that the fannish practice that I have developed here as queer excessive reading is a strategy by which fans operationalize such collective intelligence as an "alternative source of media power" (Jenkins 2006).

Case in point: the third season of *The Boys* builds towards an eventual showdown between the homicidally narcissistic Homelander – a sinister Superman by way of American jingoism – and the mysterious Soldier Boy, a powerful 'supe' who was believed to be dead but was in fact abducted by the Russians and held captive in an induced coma for many years. He carries a shield. He wears a cowl. The character design is so clearly lifted directly from Marvel's Captain America that it feels almost like Amazon daring Disney to send a cease-and-desist. Soldier Boy, the leader of a team of superheroes called Payback, is also an old-school misogynist who tells women to smile and balks at the casual affection that he witnesses between a gay couple on the street. Though, unlike Steve Rogers' (Captain America) origin story set in the 1940s, Soldier Boy is a product of the macho, corporate impulses of the 1980s; in flashbacks the character reads something like Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo*. He is emphatically a relic of some lost American past, just as Captain America is, but of mercenary imperialist

incursions into central America rather than the almost hagiographic nobility of dominant Allied narratives around World War II. He is powerful and unpredictable, self-interested and prone to shooting first and asking questions never. He is about as far from the excessively noble and upright Steve Rogers, defender of the greater good, as it is possible to be – and yet both are explicitly said to be emblematic of American national identity.

Oh, and Soldier Boy is also played by Jensen Ackles in his first major role after ending his run as Dean Winchester in *Supernatural*.

### The Superhero Industrial Complex

I have in some ways buried the lede by neglecting to mention until now that the primary adapter and showrunner for *The Boys* is Eric Kripke, creator of *Supernatural*. And yet, his involvement in *this* show is evident in the same kind of diegetic metatextuality that characterizes *that* show at its most convergent. In the same way that I have argued *Supernatural* as a text about apocalypses that emerged from the ending of a certain kind of mediated world, *The Boys* is a show about superheroes that orients itself to its subject matter through its engagement – both implicit and explicit – with the economic, sociocultural, and political ramifications of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and its imitators. Says Kripke of the superhero genre writ large:

The myth of superheroes themselves — though often created by young Jewish writers in the '30s and '40s — doesn't really apply as cleanly today, because there's these undeniable fascist underpinnings to it. They're there to protect white, patriotic America. That's what they were designed to do, that's what they do.

They're protecting the status quo. When the status quo is problematic, suddenly they become adversarial — not your hero. [...] But we just don't live in that time anymore. So the myth of the superhero taken straight, that's where it starts to become fascist. Because they're protecting a world that doesn't and shouldn't exist. Superheroes are inherently MAGA (Kripke in Abramovich 2020).

I need to pause here to emphasize once more the reciprocal and mutualistic impact that collective intelligence by way of fandom has on reading and analytical practices for every person implicated in it, regardless of their assumptive power or control of the primary narrative decision-making. The structural analysis that Kripke recounts so articulately here is a far cry from the unexamined ideals of the 'real America' that were so foundational to his initial pitch for *Supernatural* in 2005.<sup>93</sup> Kripke is a professional storyteller publicly discussing the stakes of his storytelling both pre- and post-convergence, having been right in the thick of the shifting technologies and reception practices of the media environment in the intervening 15 years. The difference is striking; the impact of Kripke's participation in the process of collective meaning-making of media consumption has influenced the possible new worlds he is able to speak, dream, and enact, both in the here-and-now of "the dumbest dystopia" and in the imaginings otherwise of his broadly speculative approach to storytelling (Kripke in Abramovich 2020).

In the interest of self-reflexivity in interrogating my own experiences of reading too much into the media I consider here – which I am always engaging with as both fan

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<sup>93</sup> Please see Chapter 2. It's the section called "The Road So Far."

and scholar, as though those identities could ever be meaningfully separated – I must for a moment switch to the parlance of fandom. I will happily confess that upon learning of Ackles’ casting in this role, I literally screamed and punched the air. Touchdown dances may have been performed. I likely traumatized the dog. We were *ecstatic* over here, honey. And José Muñoz describes the apprehension of “ecstatic time [a]s signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present, or future” (Muñoz 2009). It was one of those instances of dots connecting, a sudden moment of inspiration that brings forth entire new worlds of possibilities. It was very literally Muñozian utopian temporality in action.<sup>94</sup>

As a fan of both Ackles’ work on *Supernatural* and the character of Captain America as well as *The Boys*, I was of course excited to see what he’d do with the character – as was surely the reaction that the producers anticipated when they made the casting decision. Their shared showrunner notwithstanding, I would hazard a guess that there is significant overlap in the audiences for *Supernatural* and *The Boys* whose commodified attention would mutually benefit both Ackles’ post-*Supernatural* career and likely increase fannish buy-in for *The Boys* in the wake of *Supernatural*’s series finale. That much suddenly-available fannish attention has to be redirected somewhere, after all.<sup>95</sup> While it is of course possible that this was the extent of anyone’s thinking

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<sup>94</sup> Staying with that emotional response rather than trying to shut it down, for example, has yielded this chapter of this dissertation. So much for the grit in the instrument.

<sup>95</sup> This has been a curious consequence of the commodification of collective consumption in the convergence culture industry. (That alliteration was entirely unintentional but I am *keeping it*.) If some format hits once, do it again and again in increasingly degrading copies until everyone is so sick of it that you get *Morbius*. Which I guess is just how economic bubbles work in the creative industry, but the

surrounding Ackles' casting as Soldier Boy, I find it difficult to believe that two men who were so intimately familiar with the machinations, idiosyncrasies, and predilections of contemporary transformative fandom – having been materially implicated in their development – would not have been at least aware of the resonances of this choice within those fannish spaces.

Both Eric Kripke and Jensen Ackles *know* about the immense power of queer fannish attachment – Ackles undoubtedly knows as much about it as anybody in the world – and are familiar with the excessive, ecstatic utopian impulses that are incited for fans through a character who becomes legible as an avatar of queer futurity. After all, the same set of sociohistorical and -technological circumstances from whence emerged Dean Winchester also came the versions of the Marvel superheroes that have incited the kind of fannish enthusiasm that fuels multi-billion-dollar economies. Given that Captain Steve Rogers is the most frequently-queered of any character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe – the fandom for which shared robust overlap with that of *Supernatural* – Ackles' casting as the character's decidedly *unqueer* analog cannot be coincidental.

Which is not to say that this casting was a bad-faith attempt to capitalize on the same temporalities of queerbaiting with which *Supernatural* has essentially become synonymous. On the contrary, the image of Ackles dressed as Soldier Boy simply cannot, to use Kripke's own phrasing, be taken straight. Rather, given an excessive reading of the image, it invites the exclamatory joy of ecstatic time, of the apprehension of “[q]ueerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality [that] is a path and a movement to a

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affordances of the digital media environment that facilitated the creation of the MCU have now become so overdetermined as to be entirely without creative energy.

greater openness to the world” (Muñoz 2009). The image is a palimpsest of references, histories, convergences, contexts, and feelings that, in the networks of collective intelligence that comprise so much of the convergence culture industry, almost demands to be read too much into. And again: the impact of collective and networked intelligence on apprehensions of queer possibility do not seem to be isolated to those experiencing them from the fannish position. I contend that Ackles’ casting is yet another of *The Boys*’ not-so-implicit indictments of the superhero industrial complex and its investment in maintaining the status quo. It invites the queer utopian impulse that “is to be glimpsed as something that is extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism” which animates the MCU, both within the storyworld and through the corporate interests that the representable story inevitably serves. “This quotidian example of the utopian can be glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment,” such as those that are all compressed within the image of Jensen Ackles as a cynical, violent, unapologetically immoral Captain America (Muñoz 2009).

Through the influence of well-established networked intelligences of excessive reading that link character and actor through the apprehension of queer possibility, Ackles’ casting becomes something much more complex than a subtextual easter egg for transformative media fans. Soldier Boy is a character who, like all the figures in the dystopian world of *The Boys*, is mired in his own worst impulses and unable to transcend the stultifying gravity of his own trauma, much less the prison-house of a narrative here-and-now that is built out of the most virulent normative impulses of the present sociopolitical moment. Though *The Boys* treats all the various iterations of human sexuality with the same blunt and explicit irreverence, the text itself does not invite queer

imagination in the manner of most speculative texts including, I argue, the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While both *The Boys* and the MCU suppose a speculative version of a recognizable present, the internal temporal logics of those imagined otherwise differ significantly. If *The Boys* pulls its characters always towards the horrors of a past that has created the dystopian circumstances of the present, The Marvel Cinematic Universe is oriented always toward the protection of a utopian future that is not merely *imaginable* from within the “autonaturalizing temporality [of] straight time” but explicitly dependent upon “the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” (Muñoz 2009). Having ushered in the present moment of spectacularity in mainstream American cinema, the Marvel project has always been invested in prolonging its own influence in the aesthetics and politics of the superhero by extending the success of that present moment onwards always into the future – at least through 2033. The overt act of reproduction that allows The Marvel Cinematic Universe to even exist – its intertextually-entangled transmedia narrative structure – causes the economics of the MCU to be inherently and inextricably bound by the temporal logics of straight time.

*The Boys* speaks intelligently to a heightened version of the superhero bubble of which ~~Soldier Boy~~ Captain America and ~~Payback~~ The Avengers have become emblematic by explicitly considering the constitutive relationship between corporate capitalism, cultural imperialism, and the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism that the MCU assumes as the status quo to be protected. Indeed, the critique that Kripke offers of the superhero genre in the here-and-now of “the dumbest dystopia” is not without its merit; far from it. At the same time, the MCU has proved to be unexpectedly hospitable to the apprehension of queer futurity through the extrapolative strategies of

excessive reading, as evidenced by the sheer volume of fannish labor that has been devoted to reading too much into the texts and – more significantly – the characters of the MCU. Of the 580,716 works of fanfiction under the ‘Marvel’ fandom tag on Archive of Our Own – a figure that makes it the most prolific fandom under both the ‘Movies’ and ‘Comics’ headings – roughly half (289,038 as of this writing)<sup>96</sup> include tags M/M and/or F/F to indicate queer slash pairings.

All of which is to say that this incontrovertably straight text nevertheless contains sufficient instances of queer temporal rupture to have made the networked fannish communities that coalesce around the MCU among the most productive queer fandoms of the last twenty years. And yet, what moments of queer utopian imagination exist within the MCU are nevertheless still constrained by the circumstances of the larger narrative and its implications for “collective meaning-making” around the superhero that has indeed, as Henry Jenkins astutely foretold, made measurable sociopolitical and cultural impacts in essentially every area of public life (Jenkins 2006). While the archive of extrapolative fanfiction that reads too much into the moments of queer possibility within the MCU is not overwhelmingly dominated by a single avatar of queer futurity around whom those possibilities specifically coalesce, the comparative breadth of the queer horizon for some characters than for others speaks eloquently to the limitations of excessive reading as I have developed it thus far. The queer utopian vision that I have located in the practices of extrapolative fanfiction is demonstrably limited and conditional, and those limitations and conditions have everything to do with the workings

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<sup>96</sup> March 7, 2023

of normative temporality, circumstantial excessivity, and homonationalist exceptionalism on differently-raced and -gendered bodies. Indeed, even in the act of apprehending and extrapolating upon queer utopian potential, ‘too much’ still fails to be enough to actually achieve that ultimate vision.

### Some Assembly Required

A sprawling transmedia intertext that grew from the success of *Iron Man* in 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the result of “Marvel Studios’ project to build a franchise around a series of self-financed, interconnected film and television releases” (Brinker 2021). Comprised as of this writing of 31 feature films and 21 television and serialized streaming properties across various networks and platforms as well as short-form digital content, video games, and ‘special presentations’ (like the *Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*), the MCU is inarguably the largest experiment in interconnected transmedia storytelling ever undertaken.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Kripke’s assertion that “we just don’t live in that time [of superheroes] anymore” seems startling on its face, considering that fully half of the top 10 highest-grossing films of the 2010s were entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the franchise is currently estimated to be worth \$28 billion (Clark et al 2023). What is now called *The Infinity Saga* concluded with the epic two-part finale of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). This first full arc of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a complete intertext in and of itself, and one that

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<sup>97</sup> I should clarify here that I am speaking in the capitalistic sense of ownership and intellectual property rights. I’d contend that organized religion is arguably a larger and older experiment in transmedia storytelling, but that is neither my monkey nor my circus at the moment.

arose from the industrialization of sustained fannish attention that characterized the early digital convergence. It is to this portion of the MCU that I will address my analysis here.

In broad strokes, the story of these first three phases, *Assemble* (2008 - 2012), *Age of Ultron* (2013 - 2015), and *Endgame* (2016 - 2019), revolves around S.H.I.E.L.D.<sup>98</sup> Director Nick Fury's plan "to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could" (Whedon 2012). In a narrative innovation that fundamentally shifted the norms of American mainstream filmmaking, Phase One: *Assemble* does what it says on the tin. *Iron Man* (2008), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) establish the three primary heroes around whom the narrative thrust of *The Infinity Saga* coalesces, along with the secondary characters and ongoing conflicts that eventually culminate with a universe-spanning interdimensional battle for control of the six Infinity Stones and the existential power over life and death that they represent. The reverberating global consequences of Tony Stark's invention of Iron Man dovetail with the emergence of an extraterrestrial threat to the earth when Thor, Prince of Asgard, is ignominiously banished from his home world just as Captain America, the world's first supersoldier, is discovered frozen but alive in the Arctic ice after crash-landing during World War II.

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<sup>98</sup> Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division. Or, in the words of Agent Phil Coulson: "Somebody really wanted our initials to spell 'shield.'" The protectionist and defensive implications of the shield as a tactical weapon are not incidental to the characterization of Captain America or the version of 'America' he even represents, as I will discuss further. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s sister organization, The Sentient Weapon Observation and Response Division (S.W.O.R.D.), is a counterterrorism and intelligence agency formed out of necessity with the emergence of disastrous superhuman and extraterrestrial threats. There are a lot of analogies to be made about the rapid development of both the military industrial and surveillance states post-9/11 here, but at the end of the day I also just really think that the acronyms are neat.

The intricate consequences of this threefold temporal rupture all culminate with *The Avengers* (2012), wherein *The Infinity Saga*'s three marquee players – Tony Stark (Iron Man), Steve Rogers (Captain America), and Thor (Thor) – join forces with superspy Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), anachronistic archer Clint Barton (Hawkeye), and the tragic Jekyllian Dr. Bruce Banner and his ostensibly Hydeian counterpart (The Hulk). Their first collective meeting after the success of each character's individual film heralded a new standard of tentpole filmmaking when *The Avengers* became the first Marvel release to generate more than a \$1 billion in ticket sales (BoxOfficeMojo 2023). In coming together to meet and defeat an extraterrestrial army headed by Thor's brother, Loki, *The Avengers* and *The Avengers* solidify the overarching narrative stakes of the Marvel project, which evolve in subsequent discrete but interconnected texts through cultural and political negotiations of power and battles – both of brawn and of will – that can all ultimately be reduced to the same contest over control of increasingly unpredictable interpersonal, geopolitical, and interplanetary futures. Which has also been, and not coincidentally, the trajectory of the MCU as an intertext of the industrializing convergence culture.<sup>99</sup>

Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige is generally credited as the visionary and primary architect of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, having leveraged the emerging rhizomatic affordances of the social internet and the shifting temporalities of a digital media environment to “overlay [Marvel's] interconnected comic book model onto film,

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<sup>99</sup> There is a lot more to be said about the political power of the Walt Disney Company than can be encompassed in a single chapter (or single book, for that matter) but I feel like I need to note here that my thinking about this corporate control of the future has undergone rapid evolution in the weeks since Ron DeSantis decided to poke The Mouse. Luckily, I ran out of time to try to incorporate that stuff in anything more extensive than a footnote.

creating a multi-year plan that allows for character-based adventures that dovetail into event films” (Murthi 2016). Feige’s was clearly an advantageous skill set in the earliest days of the MCU: the yearly box office records for the period are dominated by the linear-progressive narrative norms of various action movie franchise entries like *Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith* (2005), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006), and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009). The endemic overuse of the colon notwithstanding, the titles of these films connote a monotonous, soporific feeling of cynical mass-production from which contemporary superhero films did not escape. Superhero films and adaptations of other ‘geek’ media were already becoming a driving economic force in the years leading up to Jenkins’ publication of *Convergence Culture* – Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy was an early influence on this trend – but would inevitably hit a glass ceiling of narrative possibility due to the temporal limitations of an industry-standard adaptive format built along the literary lines of the novel: with a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>100</sup> Rather than adapting the temporality of the comic book to the representational norms of the screen – which were dominated by the trilogy format at the time – the model proposed by Feige relied upon successful transliteration of the serialized, immersive, recursive narrative field endemic to the medium of comics into the much more determinist and assumptively linear language of the contemporary action film.

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, most of the highest-grossing films of this period are second and third films in franchises that attempted to prolong their own existence beyond the trilogy only to fizzle out for want of interest after a few lackluster outings. The sad farce that was made of Captain Jack Sparrow honestly bums me out to this day, because that first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie kicks ass.

The challenge of such transliteration is both temporal and receptive, as “comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and--image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially.” As Hillary Chute observes, while collaboration between artist and writer may be a foregone conclusion, the legibility of the narrative relies entirely upon the “reader of comics [who] not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back--and--forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning.” Comics do not “blend the visual and the verbal – or use one simply to illustrate the other – but [are] rather prone to present the two non synchronously” (Chute 2008). The gaps between panels – that empty narrative space wherein there is action that both must have happened and is not represented – are as necessary to the cohesion of a graphic narrative as the information-dense visuals wherein every line and color has been painstakingly considered as meaning-making on its own terms, and not just in affirmation of the verbal narrative track. The narrative possibilities of the medium are reliant upon the seen that is unspoken and the eloquence of the un-scene. Comics are, in some fundamental ways, built upon the imperative of reading too much.

Applying this logic to the screen, Feige and his team have consistently sought “different directors to come in and create new chapters that are both artistically compelling yet stylistically consistent with what has come before and what is ahead” (Ste 2016). This prioritization of a dynamic aesthetic language within the MCU has resulted in films that do not wholly rely upon the novelistic narrative progression of the plot as dictated on the verbal track, but make equal use of the visual track in creative and dynamic ways. Of course, films are necessarily multisensory experiences, incorporating the affective resonances of scoring, casting, sound mixing, and all of the other artistic

interventions that go into building an immersive and impactful speculative world, and so I will amend Hillary Chute's figuration of the visual track to better reflect the glut of sensorial information with which excessive readers of the MCU contend by referring forthwith to the aesthetic track.

Even beyond the necessarily consistent tone and style of sequential films that follow the same character or story, like Raimi's *Spider-Man* films or the first-generation *X-Men* movies, the prevailing tone of contemporary superhero media had been set in 2008 by the 'gritty realism' embodied by "Christian Bale's Kevlar-suited, mouth-breathing Batman, croaking his dire threats like an enraged, laryngitic frog" in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (Weldon 2016). In the years leading up to the release of *Iron Man*, the superhero – who, as Kripke has observed, is a reliable bellwether for the American self-concept writ large – was an isolated, tortured, martyrial soul burdened with glorious purpose and condemned to walk the world alone. Even the comparatively bright and energetic Raimi films treat Peter Parker as a tragic figure whose great power and responsibility prevent him from ever being truly honest with his loved ones, the world, or himself. The superhero in the wake of 9/11, in the early days of the American invasion of Iraq, was isolated and alone in his grim film trilogy: beginning, middle, end.

Meanwhile, Jon Favreau's most financially successful film before Feige tapped him to direct *Iron Man* had been the Will Ferrell Christmas classic *Elf* (2003).

To say that "genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist" Tony Stark brought an energetic lift to a generic field wherein it had been lacking would be an understatement. Robert Downey, Jr.'s chemistry with Favreau both on- and off-screen (Favreau also plays

Stark's long-suffering Head of Security, Happy Hogan) resulted in a fast, stylish action film with a screwball comedy's quippy dialogue and a refreshing lack of self-serious moping.<sup>101</sup> And Marvel's intentionality in matching director to character to story to style has resulted in other interesting and innovative films wherein the narrative forward-march of interconnecting plotlines balances with aesthetic modes of meaning-making to allow for a more complete visual and emotional palette than has historically been typical for filmic adaptations of superhero media. With *Iron Man*'s success as proof of concept, Feige and his team continued to prioritize the aesthetic track in ways that leveraged the intertextual play of comics reception to redefine the narrative, temporal, and affective constraints of the superhero film, and of mainstream franchise filmmaking more broadly.

The inaugural outings of Thor and Captain America are both as specific to the characters as the first appearance Iron Man had been, making use of transmedia pastiche and the visual shorthand of genre film by matching artist to story as was and remains common practice in the comics industry. *Thor* (2011) is effectively a family melodrama, complete with foundling babies and fraternal betrayal and a propensity for monologue that would make Shakespeare proud; it is directed by Kenneth Branagh. Joe Johnson, who directed *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), had been an art director for the original *Star Wars* trilogy and lent his facility with action sequences that integrated computer generated imaging (CGI) to the highly-choreographed (and edited) brawls that have since become an irreplaceable hallmark of the Marvel house style. *The First*

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<sup>101</sup> It's also about a billionaire American arms dealer turned masked vigilante, so. Not particularly funny or charming. There's also a LOT to talk about with the racial hierarchies that tend to coalesce among the antagonists in Marvel movies, and it starts here. So. Lots of things can be true at once.

*Avenger* is a World War II movie that visually invokes *The Great Escape* (Sturges 1963) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998) but is most evidently indebted for its style and energy both to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981), on which Johnson had also been an art director.

All of which is to say that the Marvel model has been so successful due to Kevin Feige's intentional use of both the narrative and aesthetic tracks to implicate *movie* audiences in the spatiotemporal practices of *comics* reception. There is an almost curatorial thoughtfulness that characterizes the crucial earliest entries in *The Infinity Saga*: a careful assemblage of disparate but equally considered creative elements that have been pivotal to the MCU's success. Filmmaking, like any form of collaborative storytelling, necessarily emerges from the talent and vision and labor of many, many people. This is more true for the Marvel films than possibly for any other such endeavor in the history of cinema, as is borne out by the films' lengthy credits: an endlessly scrolling wall of names. And yet, the MCU's success is overwhelmingly attributed to a single person by the popular press: Kevin Feige reportedly "oversees every aspect of the company's feature film and streaming activities and has built The Marvel Cinematic Universe into the most successful franchise in film history" (Squire 2023). It would perhaps be easy to dismiss this dissonance as an insidious but pervasive narrative norm within the storytelling of western history wherein the creative work of many is attributed to a single author, and that wouldn't be an unfair or incorrect interpretation of the represented facts. And yet: Feige's signature narrative innovation speaks, in my estimation, to an emphasis on the webs of networked intelligence and collective effort

that make the MCU such an astonishing achievement and so emblematic a text of the industrializing media convergence.

“It varies from tag to tag,” Feige told *Entertainment Weekly* of the post-credit scenes that have become all but essential to the fannish experience of watching a Marvel movie. “[A]nd it always just comes down to, what do we think would be a fun extra at the end of the movie? What do we think would be a fun thing *slightly* outside the narrative, but tied to the grander overall narrative, that would be the fun reward for people sitting through all of our names” (Feige in Li 2018, emphasis original). While devoid of the wildly and excessively imaginative potential of fanfiction, these narrative morsels that “are used to introduce what comes next in the MCU, often featuring new characters [...] or tying films to larger storylines” are technically extra to the narrative arc of any one film – if only slightly (Goldberg 2022). The post-credit scenes do not necessarily advance the overarching plot, but when they do, they become “overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” by which the superhero industrial complex sustains itself into the future (Muñoz 2009).<sup>102</sup>

However, while Feige describes the act of bearing witness to the credits – essentially a monument to the collective knowledge and skill of the people who made the film – as an onerous one for an audience earning a reward, his inspiration for this tactic of narrative suspension is entirely rooted in fannish enthusiasm. Recalling his delight at the post-credits scene in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes 1986), Feige describes a new horizon of imagined possibilities that opened up to him by literally reading too much by

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<sup>102</sup> Shoutout to that one Howard the Duck cameo at the end of *The Guardians of the Galaxy*.

staying through the credits. “I was a big film nerd [as a kid]. I thought, ‘Oh my God, how can I be one of these people whose names are on a movie and get to work on movies? This is so cool!’” (Li 2018)! In seeking to reward fans who sit through all the names, Feige is deliberately making space for other such moments of apprehended possibility for other young film nerds sitting in the audience. Representation, at the end of the day, really does matter – just not necessarily in the overdetermined, narratively limiting ways that the term has often been taken up. And the two are not – Feige’s anecdote, at least – mutually exclusive.

And yet, as the Marvel Universe has necessarily expanded to encompass yet more intellectual property, has sprouted new strands of the multiverse and spawned new countless new characters to keep track of from seemingly innumerable tie-in series on Disney+ that by their nature acquire a disagreeable patina of corporate synergy, the bloom seems to have rather come off the rose. With the exception of *WandaVision*, an historical sitcom pastiche that echoes the very best examples of Marvel’s clever use of the aesthetic track, keeping up with the ever-expanding Universe has begun to feel reminiscent of Lucy Ricardo’s battle with a rapidly accelerating line of chocolates moving too fast to consume. In the endlessly reproductive economy on which the MCU relies, consumption *itself* becomes work when attention is the product. As production speeds up, the quality of the product steadily declines due to Lucy’s inability to both produce and consume at a commensurate rate. While the post-credits scenes may have been initially intended as a gift for the fans who view from the fans who make, they too have been irresistibly interpolated into the industrialized imperatives of the attention economy, perpetuating storylines in an increasingly pitched battle to reproduce the

conditions of the present – in which the MCU is basically a money-printing machine – into the future.

Avengers: Assembly line.

### Reading *Not Enough* Into It

As optimistic as Feige’s justification for the post-credits scenes is, his vision for the possibilities that may be apprehended through reading too much by way of the credits is still limited by the temporal structures of white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy that *necessarily* undergird any media narrative that has been so unprecedentedly successful in the contemporary socioeconomic environment. To be sure, Feige’s transposition of the two-track receptive temporality of comics onto film has been enormously generative for the apprehension of queer possibility through *reading too much into it*, as I will demonstrate in the following sections of this chapter. And yet, as I noted in my opening anecdote, any mainstream media text of the industrializing convergence culture will inevitably be subject to the networked intelligences of the attention economy. Every post-convergence text, therefore, is as dependent upon “the reader [and reading communities ... who] not only fills in the gaps” through their own collective knowledge-making, “but also [work] with the often disjunctive back--and--forth of *reading* and *looking for* meaning” as comics ever have been (Chute 2008). Such is the case with the image of Jensen Ackles as Soldier Boy, both within online fannish spaces when the image was released and in my kitchen when I saw it for myself. And yet, the queer utopian potentials of that image, when elaborated outside of their habituated fannish context, are

consistently subject to the disciplinary accusation of *reading too much into it* that seeks to curtail those potentials.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is as unique a document of the convergence culture industry as *Supernatural* or *Sherlock* specifically *because of* its singular juxtaposition of narrative possibilities between the more mobile and ephemeral temporalities of serialized comics and the fixative determinism of filmic representation that matters, or more precisely: representation that *makes* matter. Of course, mainstream comic book fandom has long been associated with a certain kind of object fetishism – a first-edition, mint-condition, new-in-box economy of rarity – but with Marvel’s acquisition by The Walt Disney Company in 2009, the MCU became as formidable a merch-generating engine as has ever existed.<sup>103</sup> Forbes has calculated that “under Disney, sale of all things Marvel – Spider-Man swim trunks, Hulk bedding, Winter Soldier and Captain America action figures – account for nearly \$10 billion in licensing revenue from merchandise sales since 2010” (Chmielewski 2021). And this is to say nothing of lucrative brand-integration deals with official partners including Audi, Google, and (hilariously) Geico Insurance, billboards for which can be seen in the background of several of Marvel’s signature high-octane ballets of urban property damage. As Alyssa Meyers of *Morning Consult* observes:

Kids have little use for these brand partnerships, and that’s because Marvel products are not just for children – and never have been. Millennials [...] are the

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<sup>103</sup> Disney’s single more-lucrative merchandising channel runs through the land of the Disney Princesses. So. Who run the world, I guess? (Girls?) The whole ‘Disney princesses as icons of empowerment’ thing blows my entire mind. And I (apocryphally) only answered to the name ‘Cinderella’ for like a whole year.

driving force behind the lucrative Marvel fandom. [...] Interest in Marvel-branded products is highest among men and millennials. The same can be said for DC-branded products and general superhero merchandise” (Meyers 2021).<sup>104</sup>

The overwhelming financial success of the Marvel Universe speaks to the decided integration of certain modes of fannish participation into the mainstream – not grudgingly, but as essential and central to the mechanics of the industry.

While I will stipulate here, as I have elsewhere, a distinction between affirmational and transformative modes of fannish participation that have typically been gendered differently, I echo Suzanne Scott in approaching the delineation between them as “experiential categories rather than discrete or stable fannish identities” (Scott 2018). While gender is never the sole determining factor in how fannish communities coalesce, the priorities and experiences of different fannish activities do invite different reading strategies and therefore different orientations to the utopian that may be glimpsed through differently-focused strategies of excessive reading. As I hope I have made clear at this point, the transformative strategy of *reading too much into it* inheres collective investment in “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see beyond the quagmire of the present” to the “horizon imbued with potentiality” that stretches out in all directions, unimpeded by roads or walls. The horizontal possibilities of *reading too much* are not constrained by anything so straight as a narrative timeline, whereas both the narrative timeline and the assumptive straightness thereof are of enormous consequence

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<sup>104</sup> On my deathbed, I will still be puzzling over the concept of ‘general superhero merchandise.’ As a millennial myself, this may be an indication that the branding has worked and the concept of the superhero is now effectively indistinguishable for me from the corporate machines that enable them. I seem to have drunk the Hulk-branded Kool-Aid.

for the kind of excessive reading that makes matter, or: *not enough* reading. Which can, as Kripke observes and as I will demonstrate forthwith, result in a pretty major attachment to building walls.

The priorities and experiences of affirmational fandom, which Scott determines as “ultimately more monologic than dialogic,” are largely concerned with the accrual of matter. When I say ‘accrual of matter’ here, I am not only talking about the physical signifiers of the material of fandom – the box sets and t-shirts and limited edition action figures – but about the accrual of sufficient economic power within the convergence culture industries to arbitrate the kinds of stories that matter enough to be told. Of course, this has been and remains true in boardrooms and pitch meetings that are largely populated by cisgender white men for whom transformative fans hold little interest, as their strategies of fannish engagement are often directly critical of producorial decision-making and therefore unacceptable within an economic paradigm predicated upon the commodification of fannish attention but not the fair compensation of fannish labor. To quote Scott:

Industrial ‘diversity’ initiatives [are often ...] wielded to justify the industry’s commitment to preexisting demographic conceptions of fans as straight, white men. A vicious cycle has accordingly emerged: minority fans offer justified critiques of hegemonic production cultures and media representations, content producers offer (routinely half-hearted) responses to speak back to these concerns, and media industries dismiss minority fans’ textual predilections as too nice when these efforts are not immediately successful, thus further empowering a segment

of entitled white, straight male fans to dismiss minority fans' concerns and invalidate their claim to 'authentic' fan identity (2018).

Such control of the narrative on both sides of the increasingly porous fan/producer divide has created within the convergence culture industries a kind of echo chamber effect, wherein invested fans at every level feel empowered to read *not enough* into the validity of different reception strategies and priorities while simultaneously reinforcing the producerial power structures in which their representation will always matter because it always has.

The understanding of "fan culture as a female-dominated and potentially feminist space" is regularly subject to significant stress-testing even in transformative contexts, as I will elaborate presently, but the possibilities of transformative fandom must be understood as having fundamentally different and more dangerous possibilities in a post-convergence media landscape. Sustained audience investment being the chief commodity of the post-convergence attention economy, the networked reading practices of media audiences take on new urgency when considered in the context of Kripke's observation that superheroes are inherently MAGA. Liberated from the linearly delimited representational space of the panel – or even the stationary film or television screen – this communal practice of filling in the gaps has precipitated very real and very dangerous temporal ruptures in the present over control of the future through a return to the past.

Of course, there is no superhero for whom this contestation is more literal than Captain America. The character's likeness is a fixture of Pride parades across the country, where the red, white and blue of the character's uniform are frequently translated into the bisexual tricolor of blue, purple, and pink. Captain America's shield

was also brandished by insurrectionists on January 6th, 2021 as they breached the U.S. Capitol in defense of extremist ideologies produced and disseminated primarily through the modes of fandom, both affirmational and transformational alike. The difference is, I contend, in the temporal orientation and horizontal capacity of a given audience's networks of collective meaning-making. The imperative to make America great *again* connotes a shared investment in both the past and the straight line of a single narrative in which only the representation of certain people matters.

And yet, there has been, is now and doubtless will be a tremendous amount of work done by scholars across the disciplinary spectrum untangling the twisted and rotting roots of American fascism from the rhizomatic webs of affinity facilitated by the internet. I await with baited breath the articles and books to come about Fox News as its own fannish ecosystem, or about QAnon as white supremacist fanfiction. I do not make these comparisons with the intention to diminish the gravity of these other phenomena of the post-convergence; quite the contrary. It seems clear to me that those modes of engagement with popular media that have been most vociferously subject to discipline and denial from those in control of the industrialized narrative are the ones that are most necessary to take seriously now.

The powers that be of the convergence culture industry and the privileged fans on whose commodified attention they depend, however, have never had “to strain [their] vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” and so lack the skills necessary to read too much (Muñoz 2009). Rather, because the temporality of patriarchal capitalism – straight time – “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life[, t]he only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian

heterosexuality” (2009). To paraphrase Lee Edelman: the future may be cishet white guy stuff, but only if the future continues to work on the industrialized and automated norms of the assembly line.

As the machines of pre-convergence media establishment begin to break down under the inhospitable environmental conditions of the emerging internet ecology, the *not enough* temporal imperatives of reproductive futurity become uniquely constraining for fans who have historically occupied the hegemonic center: namely cisgender, heterosexual white men. Minority fans have *needed to* learn to see ourselves in characters who occupy different identities from our own as a matter of survival, as José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification attests. We have needed to imagine worlds for ourselves that are bigger and more capacious than the enumerative boxes of industrial diversity efforts; that are too much for the system that inevitably fails to contain and constrain them. The representation that is supposed to matter so frequently rings hollow or never appears at all, because the representational possibilities for marginalized fans will never be sufficiently nuanced or humane under a socioeconomic paradigm that is foundationally dependent upon narratives of *insufficiency* and lack – of not enough. We have needed to “disorder the real and wedge open a space in the social where the necessary fictions [...] could ascend to something that [is] and [is] not fiction, but [is] nonetheless, utterly heard” (Muñoz 1999). We have needed to read too much.

## Men Out of Time

To that end, I will end this chapter with a close reading of several fannish texts created in conversation with the 2014 MCU film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe & Anthony Russo 2014) to illustrate the ways in which reading too much can be both a strategy of resistance and subversion while still remaining materially implicated in the conditions of real world unfreedom and suppression. Which is, weirdly, kind of what *The Winter Soldier* is about. Out of every Marvel project included in *The Infinity Saga*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is arguably the most grounded in real world fears, anxieties, and cultural preoccupations. Directed by Joe and Anthony Russo, the film is a paranoid conspiracy thriller in the spirit of *Parallax View* (Pakula 1974) and *3 Days in the Condor* (Pollack 1975). Just to really drive the point home, the film comes complete with Robert Redford as shady S.H.I.E.L.D. Secretary Alexander Pierce, the remorseless, manipulative figurehead of Hydra, a fascist surveillance deep state whose agents have infiltrated and hijacked the American intelligence apparatus since World War II. I will remind the reader that this film, like *The Boys*, is not a documentary.

The Russos' directing credits on stylish ensemble television shows like *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003 - 2006) and *Community* (NBC 2009 - 2015) were undoubtedly influential on the film's flow, which weaves together several crucial and complex relationships as Captain America and his vanishingly few allies work to thwart Pierce's attempt to carry out what amounts to algorithmically-determined mass murder.<sup>105</sup> Given the title of the film, it might be facile to point out that Steve Rogers is at the crux of all of

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<sup>105</sup> And there is a whole edited collection of essays worth of resonances there.

these crucial relationships, but such is the character's queer gravitational force that I need to clarify which of these several possible queer ships will be my focus here. Because for all that the plot of *The Winter Soldier* bears some unnerving similarities to elements of the QAnon mythology and may very well have given convenient voice to those delusions, it is also possessed of some of the most frequently-queered scenes in the entire *Infinity Saga*. A film that finds Steve Rogers living in Washington, D.C. and working as an intelligence agent, *The Winter Soldier* hinges on the lifelong friendship between Steve and his best friend and right-hand man, Sergeant Bucky Barnes, who is supposedly killed in action during a mission to take down Hydra during World War II. Bucky, it transpires, is not dead, but has been held captive as a brainwashed assassin during the 70 years that Steve spent in the ice. With the help of Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury, Steve uncovers an enormous conspiracy all leading back to the Nazi deep science division (who were the antagonists in *Captain America: The First Avenger*), and must both stop their evil plan for world domination and save Bucky's life. He also meets and immediately connects with Sam Wilson, former Air Force pilot and eventual Avenger, in the film's opening scene. Because Steve will eventually pass his shield to Sam during the conclusion of *Avengers: Endgame*, this scene depicts the meeting between the two Captains America of the MCU.

As the brass-heavy score begins, a lone figure jogs at sunrise around the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., with the Washington monument silhouetted against the morning sky. It is an everyday scene of an early workout disrupted immediately by another figure who enters the slow tracking shot running at approximately twice the speed of the first, bypassing him within seconds with the warning utterance: "On your

left.” The first figure continues to jog past the monuments, the neoclassical columns of the Jefferson Memorial trisecting the screen as the second figure laps him once again. The third time that Steve Rogers passes the other man, who will presently introduce himself as Sam Wilson, Sam becomes audibly frustrated and valiantly attempts to run fast enough to keep up with the preternaturally swift Steve.

Cutting to a grimacing Sam sitting against a tree as he tries to recover from his overexertion, the camera lingers on Steve’s muscular, tightly clothed body as he playfully asks if Sam needs a medic. As their conversation continues, they introduce themselves to each other, although Sam has already assumed Steve’s identity based on his superhuman running. They discuss their shared experiences as veteran soldiers, Steve in World War II and Sam in an unspecified “over there.” When Sam mentions his 70 years frozen in ice, Steve’s easy friendliness becomes more stilted as he seems to remember his own excessivity and resultant loneliness. When he tries to end the interaction by walking away, Sam (a therapist who works with veterans) reestablishes common ground with Steve by sharing his own experiences of civilian reintegration, including his dislike of overly-soft beds. Steve relaxes and the men continue talking. Their conversation is largely concerned with a comparison of life in the 1940s with life in 2014. Steve concedes some improvements and admits that he’s been “trying to catch up” by reading the Internet. Sam tells him to listen to Marvin Gaye’s 1972 *Trouble Man* soundtrack, which will catch him up on “everything [he] missed, jammed into one album.” Steve produces a notebook and writes down Sam’s suggestion at the bottom of a list of cultural touchstones including Thai food and the Berlin Wall (up and down). They exchange

teasing barbs about relative speed as they shake hands, whereafter Steve is picked up in a sports car by Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and speeds away.

While Steve is introduced in this opening scene as already physically and athletically excessive to the norms of the world around him, his origin story orients him to those norms through insufficiency. Steve begins *The First Avenger* as a chronically ill, working class Brooklyn boy who is repeatedly barred from enlisting in World War II. He is eventually selected to participate in Project Rebirth and becomes a genetically enhanced “super soldier” fighting with the Allied forces in Europe. At the end of *The First Avenger*, Steve, to keep an alien weapon from reaching the United States, crashes a plane containing the bomb into the Arctic Ocean and is lost. After he is recovered and wakes up in contemporary New York City, he is recruited to join The Avengers Initiative. It is perhaps unsurprising that Steve Rogers—a man who exists outside of normative understandings of progressive time, genetically-enhanced with strength, healing, and speed in significant excess of normal human abilities—is taken up in works of queer fanfiction more than any other character in the MCU. Well over 90,000 fanfictions in the Marvel-related tags on Ao3 feature Steve Rogers as a central actor in a queer romantic and/or sexual relationship. Around 3,000 of those works pair him with Sam Wilson, and a number of *those* fanfictions directly allude to the opening scene of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Ao3 2021).

It is necessary here to acknowledge the comparative scarcity of fic pairing Sam and Steve available in what remains one of the most productive fandoms on Ao3. Despite being, in the eyes of one shipper quoted by Cait Coker and Rukmini Pande, “a pairing so obvious it started with a meet cute and closed out both movies [*The Winter Soldier* and

*Captain America: Civil War* (2016)],” extrapolative fanfiction wherein Sam and Steve are shipped together is markedly less common than queer fiction that pairs Steve with either Tony Stark or Bucky Barnes (Coker and Pande 2018). There is an extreme comparative dearth of representation in fanfiction for the pairing between Sam and Steve, whose total shared screen time in the filmic source material is comparable to the time that Steve shares with either Bucky or Tony.

Although Sam is one of a growing number of characters of color in a major franchise who has been “granted both canonical primacy and the archetypal roles that fandom has traditionally flocked to in terms of fan work,” his treatment by fan writers has been tellingly limited (2018). JSA Lowe notes that, where Sam is included in transformative works, he frequently occupies an emotional support role for the white characters around him, particularly Steve. Lowe further observes that Sam is often presented by fan writers “in an oddly race-blind way,” wherein the lovingly detailed descriptions of physical appearance that are intrinsic to fanfiction’s aesthetic are not applied equally to Sam as to his white counterparts. She postulates that, perhaps “fearful of fetishizing him, writers instead efface . . . him almost out of existence” (Lowe 2019). Though Sam otherwise checks all the boxes that would usually make him “a juggernaut character” within fandom—charisma, good looks, friendship with another primary male character—his reception by fanfiction writers and readers has been inarguably inflected by his race (Pande 2018). Discussing Sam Wilson’s treatment in transformative MCU fandom, Pande observes that the “quantified proof of the systematic erasure of Wilson’s character [is] all the more jarring in the intertextual communal spaces of fandom, where ideas of social justice are vigorously debated” and assumptions of progressiveness are

espoused by fans and scholars alike. Indeed, the case of Sam Wilson may be among the most compelling arguments against sweeping pronouncements of transformative fandom's subversiveness and clearly complicates any pretensions to "a utopian vision of fan culture as inherently progressive" (Scott 2018). My aim in the analysis of this scene and the fanfictions I read alongside it is to trace the ways in which queer temporality and excessivity coalesce differently around enculturated ideas of futurity as embodied in the raced and gendered bodies of media characters.

The scene of Steve and Sam's meet-cute in *Winter Soldier* visualizes temporality and excess in several generative ways. Through its writing and production, it invites considerations and imaginations that engage Sam and Steve as Avatars of Queer Futurity that, although queerness is never quite here, nevertheless appear "especially in sites of cultural production" like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Muñoz 2009). In the visual and verbal comparisons of Steve's speed with Sam's and through the conversational thrust of the scene, the film's production re-emphasizes that Steve cannot be assimilated into the teleology of linear and normalizing straight time. From Sam's exclamation "Dude, you just ran like thirteen miles in thirty minutes!" and Steve's rejoinder "Guess I got a late start" to Black Widow's quip, when she appears, that she is there to "pick up a fossil," an emphasis on the myriad ways in which Steve's relationship to time is excessive and nonlinear pervades the scene from beginning to end.

Sam, too, queers time and space generatively here. As a Black man occupying the hagiographic spaces of the Washington Mall, his presence brings forward and reifies a contradictory history that troubles the patriotic imaginary for which Captain America ostensibly stands. His interactions with Steve are friendly and familiar, reliant on the

shared experiences of military service to form an immediate bond that will become increasingly important as the film progresses. Here, Sam's presence emphasizes the queer temporality at stake in the scene: had Sam and Steve served contemporaneously during World War II, their service would have been racially segregated.<sup>106</sup> In a film that will pit Steve and Sam against an invisible fascist force within the American government, thereby making these subtextual indictments of the patriotic mythos explicit, the fluctuating temporalities made visible through the bodies of these two men as they interact in this space are necessarily out of *straight time*.

The relegation of Black embodiment to the signification of past-ness is undoubtedly reductive, and yet is borne out in critiques of media representation and in critical race theory more broadly. The discursive proximity of Blackness to ending, to the past, and to death are deeply rooted in what Sylvia Wynter calls the "narratively condemned status" that undergirds all sociopolitical and cultural storytelling in a white supremacist epistemological order (Wynter 1992). Victimhood is static: a product of the same temporal stranglehold that empowers straight time. Sam's Black masculine body already puts him in implicit proximity to the very real and immediate narratives of police brutality and state violence, and when set against the backdrop of the Jefferson Memorial, his presence cannot help but be disruptive to the narratives of liberty and justice that attach so easily to that space and ostensibly to the figure of Captain America as embodied

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<sup>106</sup> *The First Avenger* makes a point of including Gabriel Jones and Jim Morita in The Howling Commandos, although the inclusion of these two characters of color seems chiefly intended to visually illustrate Cap's inclusivity.

by Steve Rogers. Christina Sharpe refers to this phenomenon as “the past that is not past [that] reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016).

The vanishingly small archive of Steve/Sam fanfiction is a testament to “[t]he hegemonic nature of whiteness as the invisible norm makes ostensibly neutral spaces, such as fandom, synonymous with white spaces,” with all of the unspeaking and invisibilizing forces attendant thereto (Fazekas 2014). Angela Fazekas and Rukmini Pande address the disciplinary reception with which such criticisms from fans of color are met. The “communal cultural fandom etiquettes that encourage non-confrontation and tolerance” are often misapplied in the service of silencing critical or dissenting voices that seek to call out the false neutrality of fanfiction’s unmarked whiteness (Pande 2014). The normative disciplinary impulses at play within ostensibly progressive fandom spaces can and should not be elided; their genesis should be interrogated. The queer utopian vision that I have located in excessive reading is demonstrably limited and conditional, and those limitations and conditions have everything to do with the workings of temporality and excessivity on differently raced and gendered bodies. Any kind of fan production is by its nature tied to the here-and-now of representational media and is not immune to the sociopolitical mores developed and espoused therein, regardless of any pretensions to subversion. I suggest that what queer utopian potential exists in excessive fannish reading coalesces *most easily* around the bodies and identities that are always already most imaginable as avatars of futurity within a white supremacist and patriarchal paradigm.<sup>107</sup> After all, if victimhood is static, then it relies upon the same temporal

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<sup>107</sup> Women’s expression of erotic desire is risky within the logics of rape culture, where women’s sexuality is unavoidably proximate to pastness and to victimhood.

stranglehold as straight time. And if the proximity of Blackness to victimhood is so ingrained within a white supremacist epistemological order, it might well supersede any easy or intuitive access for characters like Sam Wilson to the imagined utopian future.<sup>108</sup>

This is not to excuse the exclusion of characters of color from the queer utopian imaginary that, I contend, becomes visible through fanfiction. My hope is that tracing the ways in which excessivity and nonlinear temporality adhere to the white male characters who are most frequently taken up in queer extrapolative fanfiction may advance the conversation about the imaginative possibilities and limitations of utopian futurity broadly conceived. To that end, I want to end this chapter with a close reading of two pieces of fanfiction that take up the opening scene of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* to more fully trace the ways in which Steve's unusual relationships to excessivity and time make him an easily imaginable avatar of a queer utopian future.

### Locating Queer Temporal Excessivity in Fanfiction

In my analysis thus far, I have considered aspects of the transformative fan communities that grow up around the practice of reading too much into it that I have thus far developed, all of which are built through and informed by a constantly-shifting archive of extrapolative fan fiction. However, I have not yet considered fanfiction on its own literary terms through close reading. While many works of fanfiction that pair Sam and Steve refer to this opening scene, the two that I will consider extrapolate upon its

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<sup>108</sup> While the ways in which Blackness and futurity interact in Afrofuturist speculative fiction (like *Black Panther*) are beyond the scope of this project, they are not beyond the scope of the broader argument that I am suggesting.

different moments of queer possibility to great effect. In selecting these pieces, I looked for fanfictions that would be easy to analyze within the limited confines of this chapter, which lead me to consider “one-shots” that elaborate on this scene directly rather than on longer stories in which this scene might comprise a smaller part of the narrative.

These fanfictions present the action of the scene through the third person-limited perspective, wherein the narrator has access to the thoughts of a single character. By taking dialogue and gestures directly from the film to extrapolate romantic/erotic potential, or by inserting missing scenes that lend context to the characters’ represented actions, the authors of these works grant characters who do not otherwise have explicit interiority the ability to express their thoughts and clarify their motivations. Because it is not entirely beholden to the visual and the aural for the possibilities of its storytelling, fanfiction is able to verbalize affective resonances that may be perceivable on-screen only to those predisposed to look for them. These resonances defy intellectualization and pre-exist the cognitive identification of intelligible emotion. They circulate in “[t]he not-quite-conscious, [which] is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here-and-now” ( Muñoz 2009). They bring to bear this potential realm of queer futurity on cultural production that might never otherwise transcend the here-and-now of representable straight time.

In “An Exercise in Tactical Routes,” Steve is written as a figure of awkward, uncomfortable excess who uses his preternatural speed to tentatively flirt with Sam as they run despite the discomfort of his temporal disjuncture and bodily excessivity. The story begins with Steve questioning the wisdom of wearing the tight shirt that he wears in the film, which he receives as a gift from Natasha Romanoff. He complains, “I’m pretty

sure everyone can see my nipples. From Virginia.” To this, Natasha responds, “[D]on’t you run like a three minute mile? You’ll be a blur” (TheLocket 2018). The excessive nature of Steve’s body and its abilities are immediate causes of discomfort, of queer feeling that would not be present were Steve to “be . . . ordinary,” which is, as Muñoz puts it, “an antiutopian wish” (2009). This queer feeling persists as he makes his way to the Tidal Basin, where he agonizes over “whether it’s safer to match pace and trail the tall stranger” whom he sees already running “or pass him and continue his run” (2018). In his consideration of the “safe” option of running more slowly than Sam, Steve experiences, as Muñoz writes, a “desire . . . that automatically rein[s] [it]self in, never daring to see or imagine the not-yet-conscious.” It is only when he indulges in his body’s queer excess to run faster that he notices that the stranger is not only tall, but “tall, dark, *and handsome*,” thereby introducing the potential of queer desire into their interactions (2018).

Steve begins to pass Sam repeatedly, each time justifying his breaking out of normative time by asking himself, “What does it hurt to enjoy the aesthetic pleasure of a stranger?” He considers the possibilities of a future wherein he talks to this attractive man, feeling his out-of-time-ness particularly keenly as he asks himself, “And then what—they go on dates together and stare at the Wall of Dead Best Friends? He points to pictures in the Smithsonian, and cries on the stranger’s shoulder?” Eventually, Steve overcomes his own desire for the unattainable ordinary and engages Sam in a conversation that is taken verbatim from the film. What is significant is the interiority that provides context and motivation for the gestures and verbal exchanges in their conversation, as when Steve “feels the man’s eyes slide down his chest, so he takes a

deep breath, puts his hands on his waist, and puffs out his ribcage.” Though the words describe actor Chris Evans’ exact gestures as he enacts them in the film, the idea that Steve is motivated in these actions by Sam’s desire for his body is a moment of queer utopian imagination that evades capture in the here-and-now of representable time.

The same slippage of straight time occurs when Sam asks Steve about his bed. Within the limitations of representable time that constrain the film, there would be no way to convey the queer potential that the author identifies here: “Steve almost says: *I wouldn’t mind going to your place*, and instantly stops in his tracks, holding his back to Sam for just the moment needed to compose himself. The serum upped his metabolism, he reminded himself. Faster heart rate, hotter body temperature. Burning 15,000 calories a day. Always hungry. And not just for food” (2018). The line of dialogue in the film serves to establish Sam and Steve’s common experiential ground as soldiers. Here, the author identifies a moment of queer potential that might have led to more had Steve not stopped himself. The author links this not-quite moment of queer desire with the excess of Steve’s body, connecting his always hungry libido with the other ways in which his super-soldier capabilities defy normal and normalizing expectations.

Sam’s recommendation of Marvin Gaye’s *Trouble Man* leads to the point at which the story becomes canon-divergent by breaking away from the limitations of the scene as it plays out in the film. Having identified Steve and Sam’s conversation in the film as being intentionally flirtatious, the author takes up that queer potential and follows it through with this exchange:

“I’ll put it on the list,” Steve promises.

But Sam catches his eye for a moment, and then his teeth hook on his lip.

“I’ve got a record-player back at my place. Real old-school. Just right around the corner.”

“Right around the corner?” Steve repeats, and he feels his cheeks coloring again.

“You could be there in two minutes.”

“I’ll do it in thirty seconds.”

“Oh,” Sam says with a smile. “I might slow you down. I was sort of counting on you carrying me.”

The grin surprises Steve, and that he feels his own face making one in response (2018).

From here, the story goes on to elaborate on a newly recognized queer eventuality that leads to Sam and Steve becoming a romantic/sexual pair by the story’s conclusion. The temporalities of the encounter break out of straight time in this initiation of *forward-dawning queerness* with Sam’s offer of the “real old-school” record player in his house, where Steve could be in two minutes. The queer moment is not quite here; it exists in the future, either two minutes from now or in thirty seconds. The fact that queerness exists, even in fanfiction, in “a sort of ontologically humble state . . . in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world” points to the ways in which fanfiction may work to “potentially stave . . . off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture” (Muñoz 2009).

Sam’s suggestion that Steve seek out *Trouble Man* is taken up frequently in fanfiction as a moment of queer utopian potential that displaces Sam from straight time in its own way. In the film, Sam tells Steve that listening to *Trouble Man* will catch him up

on “everything [he] missed, jammed into one album.” Leaving aside the forty-year gap in history that his assertion leaves, Sam, as played by Anthony Mackie, is not old enough to have been alive in 1972 when the album came out. That an album from the early 1970s could encompass all the information, feelings, and conflicts that Steve missed is an odd statement, and Sam’s recommendation of a cultural artifact that arose before his own birth throws him out of the logics of normative linear temporality. In their relationship to each other, these two men defy assimilation into straight time. It is through their shared moments of “queer relational bliss” that the potential for queer utopia arises (Muñoz 2009).

In “On Your Right,” the author notes the queer temporality of *Trouble Man* from Sam’s point of view (thingswithwings 2014). Though the title of the story is an allusion to Steve’s repeated warning of “on your left” in the opening scene of *The Winter Soldier*, the fanfiction locates the moment of queer potential opened up by Sam’s reference to *Trouble Man* at the end of that film, when Sam plays it for Steve as he recovers from the film’s climactic battle. The soundtrack appears first in this fanfiction as “a talisman” that Sam plays for himself when it appears that Steve may die, using it to mark time as he plays it repeatedly in a sort of temporal testament to his incipient devotion. “In the end,” the story goes, “the Trouble Man [sic] soundtrack only plays about twenty times—Sam loses count in the middle of the night, when he falls asleep for a while—before Steve is awake,” at which point Sam’s use of the album gains new queer potential in the following exchange:

“Is this the Marvin Gaye?” Steve asks, into the quiet.

“Yeah.” They listen together for a minute.

“I like it.”

“You better.”

Steve glances at him, smiling again. “It's kinda sexy.”

Sam, who's made out with dudes to Marvin Gaye more times than he can count, says, “Is it?”

“Yup. Now I see what your intentions were.”

Sam tries not to let the surprise show on his face, that Steve would tease him like that. It's not what he expected from a guy born before the invention of the television who routinely drapes himself in the American flag (2014).

If queerness is a horizon, then it stems out in all directions from a single phenomenological point. The horizon is not only perceivable in a single, forward-moving direction, but rather interrupts the “temporal stranglehold” of straight time by existing in all directions and in the contemplation of “scene[s] from one’s past, present, or future” (Muñoz 2009). In this exchange between Steve and Sam several days after their first meeting at the Tidal Basin, the queer horizon extends out in all directions from Sam’s use of the *Trouble Man* soundtrack, disrupting the stranglehold of straight time and making visible moments of queer utopian potential occurring in the past, the present, and the future. The album becomes a means of flirtation in Steve and Sam’s recent past together and has evidently served that purpose for Sam before when “he’s made out with dudes to Marvin Gaye.” It functions as the means by which Steve can articulate his attraction to Sam in the present, and the means by which Sam is able to imagine a future in which Steve and he will be together despite the ways in which he imagines straight time to have worked on Steve’s ability to recognize and respond to moments of queer possibility.

From Sam's initial mention of this queer means of understanding time, the author of this piece extrapolates a richly imagined queer utopia stretching out in all directions to the temporal horizon.

## Endgame

If the practice of *reading too much into* media texts is a game that fans play with a text, then the explicit representation of heterosexuality may be said to be its end. This is borne out through Steve's final appearance as Captain America in the MCU, in the appropriately-titled *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony and Joe Russo 2019). And if it is, as I contend, Steve Rogers' disjointed, unruly relationship to the straightening influence of linear-progressive time that allows queer potential to coalesce easily around him, then the character's fate in the overarching narrative of the MCU incisively forecloses that queer potential.

Though Steve's queer potential is tied to the excessivity of his physical body—he could not have survived being frozen in ice for seventy years without his preternatural resiliency—it is his temporal disjuncture that solidifies it. Agent Peggy Carter is Steve's canonical love interest in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and she is also the only character with whom Steve is frequently paired in fanfiction who belongs wholly to his abandoned straight timeline. She reappears in later films as an old woman whom Steve visits at the end of her long life without him. The tragedy of their romance lies in its temporal queerness, where Steve's abandonment of the linear progression of time has prevented them from growing old together in heterosexual matrimony. Peggy's inability

to escape from this linear timeline separates her both narratively and theoretically from Steve, whose queerness arises as a result of his non-normative exclusion from the progression of both straight time and straightness.

The byzantine machinations of *Endgame*'s plot ultimately allow Steve to return to his normative timeline, reinserting himself into temporal straightness in order to be with Peggy. After appearances in eleven films during which Steve fights cyborgs and aliens and travels to outer space alongside the male companions with whom his queer potentials are most easily legible through excessive reading, the final shot of Steve Rogers in the MCU shows him dancing with Peggy in a 1950s suburban home. For this character around whom so much queer fannish investment has emerged, the endgame comes through a very literal reintegration into the autonaturalizing temporality of straight time that is explicitly attached to the normative logics of heterosexuality.

As with other popular media characters who are frequently taken up in queer extrapolative fanfiction, Steve Rogers' interpolation into the endgame of heterosexuality reciprocally reintegrates him into straight time. The "bad feelings" that result from this restraightening of queer utopian potentials are readily apparent in the number of fanfictions published in the days immediately following the release of *Avengers: Endgame* in April of 2019. One writer of queer fanfiction identifies their story as "the Fix-It Fic that I need to heal my broken soul," while another hopes that their story will make it possible for queer fans to "rewatch endgame [sic] without feeling despair." The efforts of these authors resist the bad feelings of narrative straightening by imagining otherwise, and thereby deny the end of Steve Rogers' queer narrative potential by continuing to play the game of queer excessive reading.

Utopian temporality and imagination should not be wholly dismissed as a means of understanding the complex interplay among audiences, technologies, producers, and narratives, despite complications of fandom's inherent progressiveness in recent scholarship. Utopia in the Muñozian paradigm does not rely on progressivism; indeed, the idea of progressing with the intention of arrival at some quantifiable ideal of queerness is antithetical to the ontological humility wherein the utopian future is both not yet here and always arriving. However, despite the dismissal with which excessive reading is so often met, utopian imagination can never be wholly excised from the constraints of straight time that those who *read too much* seek to see beyond. The relationships of differently raced and gendered bodies to the imagined future are inflected by the distinctly un-utopian conditions of the here-and-now, which still often cloud the vision of those fans who have learned to squint in search of a different kind of queerness than that which has found purchase in the contemporary representative media landscape. But rather than dismissing the concept of the utopian wholly from our consideration of queer fannish imagination simply because it is partial and incomplete, we must trace its functioning through narrative temporality and excessivity in order to more fully comprehend the limitations of our enculturated ideas of who has access to what kind of future. By using Muñoz's figuration of the utopian to read too much into fannish interpretive practices as borne out in queer extrapolative fanfiction, we may express our continued investment in a queerness that is "not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future" (Muñoz 2009).

Before/Afterword

“*Could it be that we matter?*”

— *Patrisse Khan-Cullors, When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter*

*Memoir*

This dissertation has been, perhaps inevitably, a product of enormous temporal disruption. I began thinking about the concept of excessive reading when I was a Masters student at Goldsmiths in 2015. I had gone to London with the intention of exploring young women’s relationship to the surveillance state through the lens of *The Hunger Games*, a topic that immediately became so depressing that I binge watched two seasons of *Sherlock* to avoid thinking about it. For like, six hours, the exchange rate on British to American television seasons being what it is. Enamored of the novelty of living in the same city as these magnetic characters ostensibly inhabited, my desire to avoid thinking about *dystopias* brought me to thinking more about *Sherlock*, which lead me to seek out the show’s magnificent archive of fanfiction, which lead me to find The Johnlock Conspiracy and its strange relationship to the affordances of Tumblr, and eventually to this version of what is still an evolving set of ideas about *utopia* instead.

The dissertation that I wrote as a capstone for my MA in Gender, Media and Culture traced the rhizomatic movements of queer feeling across networked online communities through the idea of the fangirl, following affect theory as was en vogue with my cohort at the time. I was fascinated by the dichotomies that I apprehended between the affect – effectively the study of emotion through the language of logic – that I was using in my coursework and the study of logic through the language of emotion that I was

witnessing as I followed the threads of queer possibility that fans were very literally reading as textually observable in this show that had captured much of my available attention. Thinking through this seeming contradiction yielded the first version of a dissertation project entitled *Reading Too Much Into It*, which ultimately bears little resemblance to this one. As is only healthy, I think, there are parts of that project that now make me want to full-body cringe, but I owe much of what has become Chapter 2 of *this* dissertation to the groundwork laid therein.

That work was and remains foundational to my current thinking about excessive reading, which will also inevitably outgrow this document. It has, in some ways, already started to. When I began thinking about this project, for example, Obama was still in office, a statement that has taken on a weird kind of temporal weight in the intervening years. The steadily-multiplying and compounding ruptures of Brexit and the 2016 election, then the sustained dystopian anxiety of the Trump presidency capped off with a global pandemic and the resultant slow, inexorable cracking of late-stage capitalism through which we are now living – those things were yet to happen when I hit ‘post’ on that sucker in July of 2016. In very real ways, the world in which I began thinking about the possibilities of reading too much ended years ago.

To that end: I didn’t realize that I was writing a cultural history of the United States and Great Britain in the early 21st century until after I’d gotten my prospectus approved for something that I had initially envisioned as being much more about the literary analysis of fan writing itself. The idea of the post-convergence that I’ve developed to a limited extent in the MCU chapter necessitates the delineation of a period wherein things *were converging*. This period, it became clear to me as I wrote the

*Supernatural* chapter (boy, that thing's a doozy, huh?), could be easily defined through the lens of queer media representation and the negotiations between fans and producers over its evolving meanings and requirements. Using Jenkins and Scott as my primary interlocutors, I intend to expand this line of thinking by more intentionally defining the industrializing period of digital convergence as having occurred between roughly 2005 and 2020 in the mainstream Anglo-American media environment.

Part of my challenge in articulating the arguments I've made here is that I don't yet have solid language for a lot of what I've been trying to describe. A lot of my early thinking about the linkages between queerness, temporality, and matter has been impacted enormously by the irreversible shift in the temporal status quo that has come about as a result of Covid-19. Ideas that I began thinking about through the lens of fanfiction – about the possibilities that may be glimpsed in the moments of temporal rupture that disrupt the normative narrative languages of serialized media – shifted radically in the summer of 2020. In the enormous upswell of collective grief and terror and rage and hope and *feeling* that became newly legible in America's collective meaning-making following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, I perceived a moment of collective utopian feeling. I found myself thinking about the relationship between the temporal rupture of the pandemic and this upswell of collective imagining and enacting of a world in which Black Lives DO Matter in defiance of all representational proof in the here and now of this acutely futureless moment.

Add to that the rise of QAnon and the dangers of excessive reading when applied in defense of straight time, witness Elon Musk's colonization of Twitter for similar ends, and the ideas that I develop in this dissertation are feeling particularly ripe for expansion.

Case in point: I currently have an image of Donald Trump dressed as a superhero open in another tab and I'm not even mad about it. A lot of the work that is left to do here is around the definition of terms and the establishment of analytical parameters. To echo a term that I've used to describe the evolution of *Supernatural*, I'm just kind of building the plane as I'm flying it. My plans for this work in the immediate future involve a significant restructuring of the organizational framework to foreground the historical frame of the industrializing convergence culture and the addition of several more texts including *Doctor Who* (the absence of which from this dissertation is always surprising to people), *Good Omens*, and *Stranger Things*.

A lot of what I've written about here does come down to worldbuilding, and given the diminished and diminishing state of things here in the dumbest dystopia, perhaps a little queer excessivity is what is needed in our collective imagining of something more. At the risk of sounding alarmist, as we are faced with the imminent introduction of AI into our fragile and unpredictable media ecology, it is imperative for those of us who think about storytelling as political – in diverse ways and from multitudinous angles – to consider the possibilities of deliberately and collectively imagining otherwise as a strategy by which networked communities operationalize their collective intelligence as an “alternative source of media power” (Jenkins 2006). The convergence culture industry and the underlying sociopolitical systems that support it will only persist if we continue to read the circumstances of our collective worldbuilding potential through the canonical lens of straight time: when the only representation that matters is that which already does.

Reading too much into it necessarily requires the opposite. It is, I think, a strategy of dreaming: a way of being in the world that focuses on its potentials and not its deficiencies, a patina of giddy yearning that makes the tremendous effort required by the wasted world worth bearing just a little longer. And yes, perhaps that sounds ‘sad’ from within the evaluative confines of a world that systematically punishes excessivity when it is demonstrated by those in whom it is inconvenient – or more accurately when that excessivity cannot be easily subsumed into useful, productive, future-oriented capitalism.

Women who dream of being worth more than their wombs are told over and over again that our only value lies in our bodily capacity to sustain this system perpetually into the future. Queers whose very existence is a threat to the chrononormative social order unless and until we are assimilated into reproductive futurism are required to explain ourselves and our evolving desires through the enumerative language of representation that matters. When we brush up against the bars of the cages in which we are trapped, when we become too aware of the violences with which we have been taught to live, then our justifiably excessive responses are met with the accusation of too much emotion. We are too sensitive, too fragile, too emotional – we are overreacting and reading too much into it.

The potential of our collective desire for something more must be brought back into line, returned to the straight and narrow and pointed inexorably toward the future that is always already here. But new worlds open up when a community of people collectively decide that the one they were given isn’t enough for them, and begin to behave as though their new world is the one that matters.

So. Yeah. Let’s just do that then.

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