

The Affective Politics of Queerbaiting: Fandom, Identity and Representation

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Abstract

“Queerbaiting” is a pejorative fan-coined term that has emerged recently to refer to the tactic of intentionally hinting at, or touting, queer representation in media to entice LGBTQ viewers and gain their investments, without ever following through, ultimately under-delivering on the promise. It is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, but one with a history rooted in shifting discourses and politics of fandom, advertising, LGBTQ representation in popular culture, and digital media. An emerging body of academic literature has begun to analyse the politics and practices surrounding queerbaiting. However, to date, most studies have focused on interrogating media texts and online debates concerning queerbaiting accusations and criticisms. There is a dearth of scholarly research on how fans themselves understand and engage with queerbaiting, and its social and political implications. Drawing on twenty-four online discussions with fans involved in queerbaiting debates, this thesis provides the first qualitative, interview-based sociological account of queerbaiting. Building on existing fandom, media, and cultural studies research, it examines the meanings and politics surrounding the phenomenon.

The thesis begins by analysing some of the historical conditions that have shaped the shifting politics of queer media representation throughout the last five decades. It locates these shifts in the entangled contexts of the emergence of slash fiction in the 1970s, the rise of the “pink dollar” and formation of the gay market in the 1970s and 1980s, the increase in gay and lesbian-themed material on US network television in the 1990s, and the dramatic transformation of fan and audience media participation and practice through the emergence of the internet and social media. Utilising a range of queer theories of affect, temporality, childhood, as well as critical race theories of whiteness, the thesis then explores the ways fans are reading, conceptualising, and mobilising concepts of queerness, authorship, identity, the child, and emotion in critiquing the practices and motivations behind queerbaiting.

This thesis makes three primary arguments. Firstly, in contrast with earlier queer and poststructuralist theories that have a profound distrust of identities, the phenomenon of queerbaiting highlights a refigured identity politics mobilised around media visibility and invested in contemporary tropes of trauma, victimhood, and authenticity. Secondly, queerness within queerbaiting debates has been refigured and repurposed as singular and definitive in order to locate it at the primary textual level. By locating it within the diegesis, queerness is centred around the perception of authorial intent. What follows from this, I

argue, is an impulse to definitively delineate between ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ queer representation. I observe that such impulses are entangled with the figure of the child, happiness, and orientations towards the future. Thirdly, the orientations of fans toward texts seen to be queerbaiting highlight shifts in modes of political subjectivity for fans in which there is an impulse to know, see, and celebrate queerness at the centre (of the narrative and of mainstream culture) rather than at the margins. What lies at the centre, I argue, is a deep entanglement of queerness with whiteness. Thus, accusations, criticisms and the politics surrounding queerbaiting are shaped by the dynamics of race and whiteness.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in this thesis were approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (reference number: S17-187).

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Introduction

Fashion house *Calvin Klein* launched their #MyTruth campaign in 2018, featuring celebrities “speaking their truth” in their Calvins. One of their advertisements for this campaign, featuring model and influencer Bella Hadid and nineteen-year-old computer-generated model avatar and influencer Lil Miquela, was subject to intense criticism for what has become known as “queerbaiting.” Queerbaiting is a pejorative fan-coined term that has emerged recently to refer to the tactic of intentionally hinting at, or touting, queer representation in media to entice LGBTQ¹ viewers and gain their investments, without ever following through. Queerbaiting is ultimately perceived as a practice that under-delivers on the promise of queer representation. The term is used largely to criticise television; however, it has expanded to include films, celebrities, books, music, comics and brands. In a paid partnership with *Calvin Klein* on Instagram, Miquela uploaded a campaign photo of her and Hadid with the caption, “No one else can define our own truths. #MYTRUTH #MYCALVINS” (@lilmiquela 2019). Calvin Klein’s Instagram page uploaded the same photo with the caption of a quote from Hadid: “I think being vulnerable makes you more truthful with yourself” (@calvinklein Instagram 2019).



Figure 1: Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela for Calvin Klein’s #MyTruth campaign.

¹ Although I use “LGBTQ” to refer to “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer,” I am not uncritical of its usage and acknowledge the problematic attempt to unify people through identity categories. Different acronyms used by others in this thesis also include “LGBT,” “LGBTIQAA+.” The variety of terms highlights the problematic nature of attempting to identify this ‘community.’

However, it was the video accompanying the campaign, featuring a kiss between Hadid and Miquela that received backlash from critics, accusing the video and brand of queerbaiting (Calvin Klein YouTube 2019). The 30-second video begins with Hadid standing alone in Calvin Klein clothing, later joined by Miquela. As Hadid faces the digital avatar, a voice-over begins: “Life is about opening doors. Creating new dreams that you never knew could exist.” Music begins and the two exchange a kiss, the screen fades to black, and white text appears: “Calvin Klein.” The caption for the video reads, “Nineteen-year-old robot Lil Miquela blurs the lines of truth and fiction with Bella Hadid. Is this a dream or real?” Some critics focused on Miquela’s presence in the influencing world as the most significant and confronting problem for contemporary culture. Arwa Mahdawi (2019), writing for *The Guardian*, explains, “While I’m no fan of brands exploiting lesbianism to sell stuff, I found the nature of the Miquela/Hadid controversy slightly odd. As far as I’m concerned, the most disturbing aspect of the campaign isn’t the faux-lesbianism, it’s the fact that Miquela is, you know, a fictional character.” Most critics, however, were not as concerned with Miquela’s existence as a robot/digital avatar and influencer. Rather, they focused on the “faux-lesbianism” as evidence of the brand’s intentional desire to exploit queer viewers, to queerbait:

We want actual representation and not using this community to sell your product by exploitation. (Twitter user quoted in Grace 2019)

Who is gonna tell Calvin Klein you’re supposed to wait until June for your tone-deaf queer-bait ad campaigns!! Lil miquela and bella Hadid out here smooching two weeks too early!!! (Twitter user quoted in Richards 2019)

There are plenty of real LGBTQ Models that could have been used. #noexcuse. (Twitter user quoted in Duribe 2019)



Figure 2: Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela “blurring the lines of truth and fiction.”

It is the recent emergence of the phenomenon of queerbaiting as a named criticism that forms the subject of this thesis. The following broad questions have guided the study. What are the historical, social and political forces conditioning the emergence of queerbaiting? How are notions of queerness and identity being refigured and mobilised in queerbaiting politics? And what are the effects of queerbaiting politics for queer politics more broadly? Whilst some debates focus on textual meaning, this thesis demonstrates that queerbaiting critique is reflective of wider identity and representational politics. The study will explore how queerbaiting presents a significant refiguring of contemporary queer identity politics. Identity categories typically provide many queers with meaning, intelligibility and authenticity. They can capture the experiences, desires and sensibilities of queers, providing them with a sense of knowing their queerness (Cover 2012a, b, 2019a, b) and connecting them with a community of like-minded others. Queerbaiting discourse presents identity politics entangled with representation and the notion of authorial intent. Representation in media is positioned by fans as the site through which queerness can be made intelligible, offering the possibility of affirming images of authentic queers under the full control of media creators. Queerbaiting is seen to close off this possibility of affirmation. Whilst identity categories for fans can capture queerness within themselves and in the characters on screen, they are also used to provide political saliency and credentials for criticising homophobia and harmful representation. As such, queerness within these debates is understood in ways that are good for their politics. This thesis will analyse assumptions being made about queerness, and how it is being conceptualised and performatively mobilised within these politics, paying particular attention to discourses of identity, intentionality and authenticity.

In this *Calvin Klein* controversy, the purported heterosexual identity of Hadid provides evidence for critics of the brand's intent to queerbait. Hadid kissing Miquela creates the illusion of same-sex attraction or a queer identity where there supposedly is none. This, for critics, demonstrates the brand's deliberate attempt to capitalise on queerness and exploit the desire of audiences (consumers) to see queer representation in media.

So visible were these criticisms that the company responded to the accusations on Twitter:

The concept for our latest #MYCALVINS campaign is to promote freedom of expression for a wide range of identities, including a spectrum of gender and sexual identities. This specific campaign was created to challenge conventional norms and

stereotypes in advertising. In this particular video, we explored the blurred lines between reality and imagination. We understand and acknowledge how featuring someone who identifies as heterosexual in a same-sex kiss could be perceived as queerbaiting. As a company with a longstanding tradition of advocating for LGBTQ+ [sic] rights, it was certainly not our intention to misrepresent the LGBTQ+ community. We sincerely regret any offense we caused. (@calvinklein Twitter 2019)

Queerbaiting in its definition criticises the *intentional* exploitation of audiences with the false promise of queer representation. *Calvin Klein*'s apology predictably focuses on their intentions. They claim that their intentions were authentic and pure in their aim of promoting "freedom of expression for a wide range of identities," a goal seemingly in line with contemporary representational politics. They also respond to the focus on Hadid's identity, stating that they agree that such identification by one of their models could lead to the perception of queerbaiting.

This controversy encapsulates many of the longstanding issues animating LGBTQ politics that will be explored in this thesis concerning questions of sexuality, identity and truth. Hadid's purported heterosexual identity serves as the basis for accusations of queerbaiting, as it is seen to render inauthentic her kiss of Miquela in the advertisement. This basis is supported by the company in its apology. As one Twitter user cited above stated, the advertisement should have contained a "real LGBTQ" model. This thesis intends to explore how such notions of the "real" are mobilised and how, in stark contrast to postmodern interventions, contemporary identity and representational politics are being refigured through investments in authenticity and truth.

Identity, within queerbaiting politics, becomes the primary site of investigation. In such politics, desire, behaviour and identity tend to be normatively aligned, such that any apparent disconnect between them speaks to inauthenticity in both the depictions of queerness and the intentions of media creators. This focus on and policing of sexual categories demonstrate how queerbaiting is deeply entangled in an identity politics of truth. Sexual identity categories are seen as illustrative of authentic sexual desire. Criticisms of Hadid and *Calvin Klein* highlight the ways in which contemporary investments and impulses within identity politics are oriented towards authenticity and coherence, whereby behaviours and desires must correspond with legible categories. Queerbaiting accusations often arise when such authenticity is deemed by critics not to be present, both in the sexual orientation of the subject as well as the intent of creators. Through such accusations, audiences, consumers and fans are positioned as victims—operating without agency—of negative and harmful representation. This thesis aims to analyse various political and

cultural dimensions, motivations and practices within the phenomenon of queerbaiting. Such analysis will require an exploration of the historical, social, industrial and political contexts and shifts that led to its emergence. *Calvin Klein* and the history of marketing to gay and lesbian consumers is my first port of call and will be examined in greater depth in the following chapter.

Calvin Klein became a “veritable legend” amongst advertisers for successfully courting gay and lesbian consumers through their coded marketing (Gluckman and Reed 1997, 5). In their apology for queerbaiting, the brand refers to this history of their connection to the gay and lesbian community as “advocacy.” It must, however, be understood through this specific marketing strategy of deliberate ambiguous imagery. From the early 1980s to 1990s, in what predates and presages the named phenomenon of queerbaiting, the brand became well-known for utilising homoerotic imagery of boyish male models and ambiguously gendered erotic advertisements (Bronski 1984; Bordo 1999; Sender 2003; Branchik 2007).² Such homoeroticism has been linked to physique photography that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s with the popularisation of bodybuilding (Waugh 1996). This physique photography is considered by some to be a precursor to contemporary gay male print culture as the subtle or implicit homoeroticism is understood to have been part of a deliberate attempt to convey ‘gayness’ while circumventing censors (Waugh 1996; Nealon 2001).³ The homoeroticism in Calvin Klein campaigns, notably by the photographers Bruce Weber, Herb Ritts and Steven Meisel, draws on visual cues and tropes that were used long before the supposed courtship of gay consumers. The reception of homoeroticism in the Klein campaigns, however, could also be connected to the rumours surrounding Calvin Klein himself. Stories of his sexual encounters with male sex workers and porn stars were the subject of gossip and unauthorised biographies at the time (DeCaro 1994; Gaines and Churcher 1994).

Eager to capitalise on the gay and lesbian market, the *Calvin Klein* company bought advertising space within the first year of publication of *Out Magazine* in 1991 (Sender 2001). Despite this seemingly deliberate effort to court gay and lesbian consumers, the brand staunchly denied such intentions:

We did not *try* to appeal to gays. We try to appeal, period. If there’s an awareness in that community of health and grooming, then they’ll respond to the ads. You really

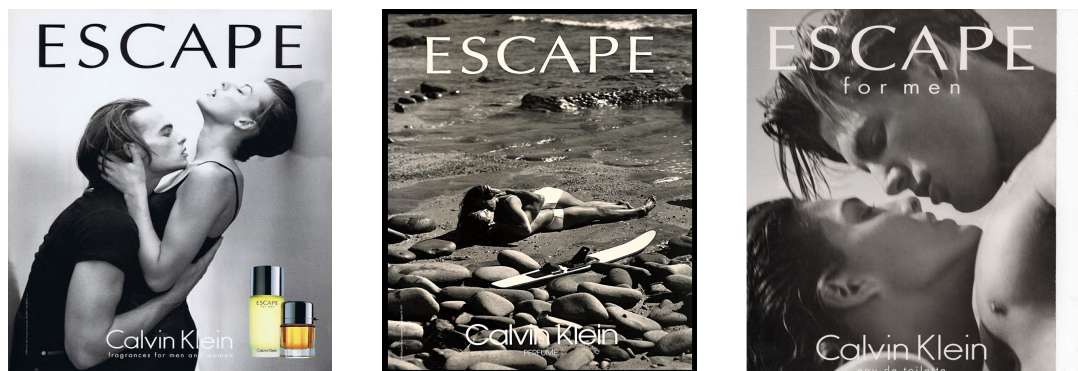
² It is also important to consider the influence music had on the proliferation of gender and sexual ambiguity in mainstream popular culture at the time (see *Life* 1985; Lecklider 2004).

³ These images largely consisted of white men, highlighting an entanglement of queerness and race that will be explored in chapter five of this thesis.

want to reach a bigger market than just gays, but you don't want to alienate them.
(spokesperson for Calvin Klein quoted in Bronski 1984, 180)

This ambiguous imagery not only appeals to gay and lesbian consumers, but also provides an 'edgy' appeal to some heterosexual consumers. Such ambiguity and queerness allow straight people to engage in sexual and gender transgressions through the safe practice of consumption. Yet what is interesting about these images and *Calvin Klein's* hesitance to align itself with exploitative intentions (or even deliberate courtship) is that this seems to be similar to their contemporary practices three decades later.

"Freedom of identity and expression," the purported goal of the *Calvin Klein* campaign in 2019, capitalises on the ambiguity of gender and sexuality in their advertisements. This goal also aligns to some extent with contemporary, mainstream LGBTQ politics. Whilst the brand may have been hesitant to acknowledge their close connection to the gay and lesbian community in the 1980s, they have clearly become more explicit in their dedication to activism and advocacy. Yet what the Hadid/Miquela queerbaiting controversy highlights is a shift in the ways this same ambiguity and homoeroticism utilised in the 1980s and 1990s is interpreted by audiences and consumers today. Such a shift demonstrates the political and economic requirements of brands to distance themselves from any perception of exploitative intentions. What has brought about this change?



Figures 3, 4, 5: Calvin Klein's androgynous and sexually ambiguous *Escape* campaign (1990–1993).

The sexual or gender identity of models utilised by *Calvin Klein* in the 1980s and 1990s was never the subject of enquiry in an attempt to ascertain the 'truth' behind the intentions of the campaign, or indeed the truth of the sexual or erotic charge of the advertisements. Such truths were not embedded in the policing of an authenticity of sexual desire, behaviour or identity. Authenticity, however, is at the heart of contemporary queerbaiting

discourse: contests over the authentic textual meaning (McDermott 2018) call for authentic intentions to positively represent queerness rather than exploitative queer imagery, and authentic connections between explicit desire, behaviour and identity. It is precisely this shift that provides the starting point for this thesis and its examination of the emergence of queerbaiting as a named phenomenon.

So much of queerbaiting discourse as it plays out in online fandom is centred on the actuality of queerness, of determining whether the queerness is really there, in the text, or whether the intentions of the creators were to use this queerness in an exploitative (and harmful) way (McDermott 2018; Brennan 2019). This thesis, however, will not be preoccupied with an attempt to *prove* the existence of queerbaiting. It will avoid conducting textual analysis of media accused of queerbaiting or paratextual content in order to highlight the intentions of creators. Such determinations are impossible and, I argue, less significant. In Brennan's (2018) introduction to the special issue on queerbaiting published by the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, he cites Adrienne Shaw from an interview with Ruberg (2017) that has particular resonance for him:

I teach LGBTQ representation courses, and one of the things I've discovered, especially in the past couple of years, is that students are resisting queer readings. They introduced me this past semester to the term 'queer baiting.' It's when writers for a TV show, for example, put two characters together in a way that implies that they could have a relationship but they never actually go through with it. I see queer readings as a great space to play with the text outside of explicit representation. The students, on the other hand, interpret it negatively as a trying-to-have-their-cake-and-eat-it-too mode of contemporary media making. It's hard to get them to remember a time when this was actually a very resistant strategy. It wasn't just about media makers tricking you. It was about finding space in the text where you could be legible too. (Shaw quoted in Ruberg 2017, 169)

This quote from Shaw, published in *Camera Obscura*, highlights the shift that will be explored throughout this thesis—a shift that centres on the ways audiences are consuming queer media. I examine the implications regarding queerness, identity and politics that such a shift presents. Analysing this recent mode of political critique highlights how identity and queerness are being conceptualised and mobilised in ways that demonstrate a contemporary political subjectivity grounded in notions of authenticity, and an impulse for intelligibility and coherence.

Approaches to the study of queerbaiting

In this section I review the scholarly literature on queerbaiting, intersecting fields of analysis, and various approaches employed to study the phenomenon. My methodology will be explained in greater detail in the next section; however, it is important to note that theory, data, methodology and methods are all inextricably entangled and cannot be clearly delineated (see Boellstorff 2010). The theories I draw upon inform my methodological approach and the methods I use to collect and analyse data, and vice versa. Whilst I have attempted to separate my literature review, methodology and methods for clarity and readability, it will become clear that there is no definitive distinction between them, as they each inform the other.

Defining queerbaiting

Whilst research into queerbaiting is in its infancy, there has been some academic inquiry into the phenomenon. Scholars who investigated and interpreted queerbaiting discourse in the early days of its emergence tended to argue that it is an exploitative industry tactic (Collier 2015; Fathallah 2015; Sheehan 2015). They asserted that queerbaiting deliberately capitalised on the sensibilities of queer audiences, without the risks purportedly associated with explicitly depicting queer characters and narratives. Emma Nordin's (2015) oft cited Master's thesis is influential in its wider scope of analysis. She examines the etymological origins of the term "queerbaiting," ultimately asserting that its very existence is a form of "fan activism" in its attempt to label such an industry tactic as intentional (also see Brennan 2019). She writes that fans and internet communities define queerbaiting as producers and creators of media "intentionally trying to lure an audience to watch something under the false pretence that it will have queer content" (2015, 1). The word "intentionally" is important here. As this thesis will demonstrate, the presumption of knowledge of the intentions of creators provides the foundation for criticisms of queerbaiting as exploitative and harmful. "Queerbaiting," Nordin explains, "is about an audience claiming to know the producers' preferred meaning and accusing them of lying about it or not standing for it" (2015, 1). This focus on intentions, or the perception and performativity of intentions, is reflected in contemporary definitions by fans. "Fanlore" is a wiki site that contains knowledge of fandom practices, definitions, activities and histories where users collaboratively modify content and structure. The website's definition of queerbaiting describes it as "the perceived attempt by advertisers or canon creators to draw in a queer

audience ... by implying or hinting at a gay relationship that will never actually be depicted” (2019). “Canon” here refers to the source material and the textual meaning intended by the creators (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 9). The traditional definition of queerbaiting refers to subtext that is never actualised into the denotative textual level. However, the definition has undergone significant evolution even in the last decade since its coinage. Eve Ng’s (2017) valuable contribution to the study asserts that the use of the term to criticise explicitly queer characters in the television show *The 100* (2014–present) is evidence of a conceptual motility. She argues that the term queerbaiting is applicable when the expectations of queer representation—influenced by textual and paratextual content—are not met. Whether referring to subtext or explicit, denotative text, queerbaiting still centres on the perception and mobilisation of intentionality.

The focus on intentionality in queerbaiting critique privileges the canon and the creators in the authorisation of authentic textual meaning. Judith Fathallah’s definition highlights this assertion:

Queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes. (2015, 491)

Denial of intentions and mockery of queer readings are fundamental for Fathallah in the conceptualisation of queerbaiting as a deliberately harmful practice. With this focus on authorial intent, it is unsurprising that before the term was coined there was a focus on the political economy of media production to explain the intentions of the creators. For example, Meyer’s (2013) examination of the response of viewers to the CW television show, *Smallville* (2001–2011) demonstrates the pervasiveness of discourses of authenticity and intentionality. The show, understood to contain homoerotic subtext between male characters Clark Kent (Tom Welling) and Lex Luthor (Michael Rosenbaum), aired before the term “queerbaiting” was coined. Meyer observes that many fans believe that the homoerotic subtext—the “slash elements”—were not intentional. As the narrative progressed, however, fans slowly began to interpret the subtext as deliberate (2013, 488). What is interesting about Meyer’s observations is that rather than suggesting this intentionality was evidence of exploitation or homophobia, the fans she interviews focus on the political economy in which *Smallville* was produced:

This recognition suggests that both the participants and the writers/directors/producers are aware that an explicit “gaying” of the Superman narrative would have directly impacted the political economy of the WB and the later CW networks. Alienating viewers who do not identify the relationship as homoerotic would ultimately result in a loss of profit for the show. Thus, these viewers believe that the industry is consciously using the subtext as a way to draw a marginalized population of viewers to the program. (489)

Contemporary critics of queerbaiting also acknowledge the contexts of queer representation. Such contexts involve the political economy of media production and the perception of the formal and informal restrictions placed on the ability to represent explicitly queer characters and narratives. However, recent queerbaiting debates suggest an understanding that such restrictions do not exist to the extent they did in the past. As this thesis will show, fans believe that because openly LGBTQ characters are able to be depicted in media, the relegation of their queerness to subtext not only highlights the hesitation or refusal of creators to provide queer representation, but it demonstrates a deliberate intent to exploit queer audiences.

In my contribution to the special issue on queerbaiting, I argue that the notion of and commitment to an authentic and singular textual meaning is negotiated between fans and creators (McDermott 2018). Analysing online videos of QnAs at fan conventions, and *Supernatural* (2006–2020) and *Teen Wolf* (2011–2017) fandoms in particular, I observe that authenticity of and authority over textual meaning is central to the legitimacy of queerbaiting claims and criticisms. This thesis extends this argument and explores the conceptualisation and mobilisation of authenticity in the centring of authorial intent, the singularity of textual meaning and the designation of positive or negative queer representation. It will also examine the desire of fans for an authentic queer identity that is shored up in futurity politics of media representation. This approach is quite different from established research on queerbaiting that often accepts fandom as inherently resistive or takes the harms of queerbaiting and the intentions of the creators to exploit as self-evident. Rather, I look at the politics, investments and assumptions that underpin queerbaiting discourse. In order to interrogate these discourses of representational politics, intentionality, identity, authenticity and queerness, I will draw on poststructuralism, queer theories and affect theories. I explore such theories, methodologies and bodies of research in the following sections.

This thesis follows the poststructuralist tradition of deconstructing notions of ‘truth,’ particularly as it pertains to the legitimacy of textual meaning. The sentiment outlined in Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay “Death of the Author” is particularly useful for my examination of the contemporary queer reading practices of fans. Barthes calls for the removal of authorial intent from any position of power and authority over a singular, authoritative meaning. Instead, he writes,

a text is not a single line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash ... to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. (146-147)

A Barthesian approach to texts opens up space for a multiplicity of meanings, ‘truths’ and, more importantly, a decentring of the figure of the “Author” from any legitimising effect. However, current research on queerbaiting, such as Sheehan (2015), Collier (2015), Fathallah (2015) and Mueller’s (2015) accounts, re-centres the Author by pointing to textual evidence of homoeroticism to claim intentionality and representational harm. I do not intend to conduct a Barthesian textual analysis of media accused of queerbaiting. Inspired by this approach, I look instead at the function of the Author figure in contemporary queerbaiting politics. No research has been conducted into the *performativity* of intentionality, that is, what intentionality is doing for politics, and how it is being conceptualised and mobilised within queerbaiting discourse. One of the arguments I make in this thesis is that queerbaiting discourse is (re)produced via the performativity of authorship and the re-centring of producer intentionality. In order to argue this point, I will examine the affective politics of victimhood and trauma mobilised by fans that are reliant upon a claim of authorial intent.

As queerbaiting emerged in online fan cultures, academic literature that analyses fandom as a culture, identity and practice provides a particularly useful research area for this thesis. Early studies of fandom began with the primary aim of reclaiming the image of the fan. This reclamation was attempted by challenging the notion of fans as passive and uncritical consumers of ‘lowbrow’ culture (Penley 1991; Jenkins 1992). The concept of the “active audience” grew from this reclamation, suggesting that fans were indeed active in their consumption and were able to resist dominant ideologies in mass media texts

(Radway 1984; Fiske 1987; Hartley 1999). John Fiske (1992), utilising Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) idea of taste as the effect of social capital, provides a key contribution to this area of research. Fiske demonstrates how fans engage in nuanced, and potentially resistive and subversive processes of meaning-making that are usually reserved for so-called 'highbrow culture.' This early stage of fan scholarship has been subject to some criticism since. Scholars are now hesitant to accept binary notions of dynamics of power such as fan-producer and passive-active (Hills 2002). Instead, they tend to focus their examinations of fans on more situated contexts that allow for greater nuance. These examinations might focus on fandoms that are not centred on resistive reading practices, for example, sports fandom and cult collectors (Crawford 2004; Alden 2007). Further, scholars are now speaking about the erasure of fans of colour that existed during this era of fandom and fan studies. Critical race scholars argue that issues of race and racism were (and continue to be) ignored in order to maintain the illusion of fandom as a transgressive, playful and communal space for all fans (Pande 2018).

A prominent area of fan studies, and a key focus of this thesis, is the queer reading practices of fans. "Fanfiction" describes the work of fans creating stories that use primary texts as inspirational springboards to expand and transform official narratives. "Slash fiction," or "slash," is a genre of fanfiction that focuses on the pairing of two characters of the same gender, gaining its name from the punctuation that separates them, for example, "Kirk/Spock." With the male characters Kirk (William Shatner) and Spock (Leonard Nimoy), *Star Trek* (1966–1966) is largely considered by most academic and fan sources as the beginning of slash fiction in English-speaking, Western fan communities of the early 1970s. During this time, slash fiction was mostly relegated to distribution in fanzines at conventions, and thus was limited in its reach and access (Bacon-Smith 1992). However, with the advent of the internet, slash fiction is now able to proliferate with seemingly endless possibilities of character pairings and plot devices (Falzone 2005).

What the emergence of queerbaiting discourse highlights is that these queer readings within slash fiction are not relegated to the shadows. Rather, fans are now able to use social media to speak back to the creators, make their queer readings visible and have an impact on the production of the text. Richard Dyer writes about this audience--producer relationship in the context of celebrity persona:

Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them. Moreover, the agencies of fan

magazines and clubs, as well as box office receipts and audience research, mean that the audience's ideas about a star can act back on the media producers of the star's image. (2004, 4)

At the same time, however, Dyer acknowledges the clear imbalance of power present in the authorised production of media. "The audience is more disparate and fragmented," he writes, "and does not itself produce centralized, massively available media images" (2004, 4-5). Yet, it is this fragmentation and diversity that allows for audience interpretation to resist being controlled wholly by media creators. Dyer observes a resistive queering in this consumption. He argues that queer readings of mainstream media by audiences is "tantamount to sabotage of what the media industries thought they were doing" (2004, 5). His use of the word "sabotage" speaks to the notion of authority and power over the production of meaning that is foundational to queerbaiting. Fans are seen as not only in defiance of the dominant (hetero) meaning but are in fact a threat to the text itself and the purported intentions of the creators. As I have noted, this thesis is not concerned with determining the truth or existence of queer textual meanings. Rather, my aim is to analyse the politics that surround queerbaiting critique. To do so, I will analyse assumptions about queerness being made in these readings and how textual meaning is being utilised in contemporary queerbaiting politics.

When separated from the intentions of the creators, however, the textual interpretation of these fans can also be read as a mode of queer reparative reading. Slash fiction might be observed as a site for queer potential, a practice of queer reading of popular texts that undermines dominant (heteronormative) meaning. However, these queer readings must not be viewed as being read *into* these texts. Such understandings of queerness have been used effectively in queer analyses of media. Alexander Doty (1993, 2000), for example, asserts that queerness already presides in all texts. Similarly, Henry Jenkins claims that slash "unmasks the erotics of male friendship" (2012, 205), suggesting that queerness is being revealed by these readings. Such imagery implies that fans uncover the queerness already in the texts, staging an intervention into dominant heteronormative modes of consumption. This is supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suggestion that the purpose of queer reading is "to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and ... to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged" (1993, 3). Yet, this practice of revealing, this unveiling of queerness, is an act of survival driven by an impulse to see oneself reflected in an affirming way. Fandom, and slash

fandom in particular, can be seen as carving out spaces of survival in a heteronormative world.

Much of the research on queerbaiting has been conducted by scholars of fandom studies who tend to view fandom as resistive and queerbaiting as harmful (Duggan 2019; Brummitt and Sellars; Schneider 2019). Such claims accept the queer readings of fans as accurately interpreting the queerness of the text or, at the very least, the subtext that is supposedly intended by the creators. Monique Franklin (2019) and Joseph Brennan's (2019) essays, however, do attempt to reframe the contemporary narrative of queerbaiting as inherently harmful. Within such narratives produced and reinforced by many fans and scholars, queer readings and subtext are seen as "poor compensation for meaningful representation" (Roach 2019, 66). Franklin, however, suggests that contemporary queerbaiting discourse oversimplifies notions of good and bad queer representation, and instead calls for queer readings of subtext to be seen as potential tools of resistance. Similarly, Brennan draws attention to such moments of homoeroticism and queer subtext as sites of potential play and pleasure instead of harm. Rather than accept the existence of queerness claimed by the textual interpretations of fans and then assert that harm was caused from the deliberate acts of the creators, I will look at how queerness is being conceptualised, mobilised and utilised in queerbaiting discourse. This thesis will employ theorisations of queer readings to examine the practices of interpretation and modes of identification present in queerbaiting discourse. I will consider how this desire to see oneself is connected to the drive for authenticity and intelligibility that provides the foundation for queerbaiting politics.

In my analysis of audience interpretation, I will question what enables these queer readings and how they are being enacted by fans. Doty asserts that these spaces of survival must be understood as making visible the queerness that is already present. He writes that "to base queer readings only upon notions of audience and reception leaves you open to the kind of dismissive attitude that sees queer understandings of popular culture as being the result of 'wishful thinking' about a text or 'appropriation' of a text by a cultural and/or critical special interest group" (2000, 4). But how might we see this queerness? Homoeroticism, for example, is "unresolved and discontinuous" (Sanader 2009, 16). If queerness is being read into/from homoerotic moments in texts, as occurs in many queerbaiting controversies, the queer readings are based on a visual and decoding practice that is invited and ongoing. They are based on a meaning that is never fully actualised. The practice of seeing homoeroticism, or what Melanie E. S. Kohnen describes as "seeing

queerly,” is a “desired way of seeing, a spectatorial position actively sought out” by those interested in seeing it (2008, 211). Fans involved in queerbaiting debates are interested in seeing queerly. Further, Dyer (1993) explains that certain readers use their own “knowledge” of oppression to seemingly counter dominant interpretations and productions of meaning. It is through this knowledge that reparative readings are enacted. For Sedgwick, the impulses behind reparative readings speak to the ways in which queer audiences and subjects almost forcefully enact ways of self-affirmation. She writes, “[queer] selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from ... a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (1997, 35). As noted, current research on queerbaiting has not analysed the performativity of queer reading strategies by fans. This thesis intends to redress this gap by examining such interpretation not to identify the ‘truth’ of textual meaning, but to explore what these strategies are doing for contemporary queer subjectivity of fans, and how such strategies are conceptualised and mobilised for their politics.

Queer theory and identity

Poststructuralist inspired queer theory also aims to decentre any notion of ‘truth,’ particularly as it relates to identity, gender, sex, sexuality, desire and bodies. As the ‘truth’ at the centre of queerbaiting politics is queerness, queer theory provides an especially useful lens through which to analyse the phenomenon. Queer theory, in the poststructuralist sense, is an area of research with a methodological approach that encourages a deconstructionist analysis. Emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer theory examines the ways in which gender and sexual subjectivity are discursively constructed through regimes of power. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1980), Sedgwick’s (1990) foundational work argues that the heterosexual/homosexual binary of sexuality is in fact discursively produced. In this tradition, queer theory more broadly highlights the ways in which various knowledge of sexuality are historical and cultural. It asks questions of how hierarchies are reinforced, who or what is excluded in the impulse to categorise desires and bodies, and in what ways might we work to subvert, challenge and undermine the structures that reproduce violence. This thesis draws on the works of queer theory from the starting point of denaturalising dominant understandings of identity, sexuality and gender. More specifically, a queer theoretical approach is particularly useful for an examination of the ways in which ideas of queerness and identity are being

conceptualised and mobilised in contemporary politics. As noted above, there has been little research conducted that analyses the way queerness and identity are constructed within queerbaiting discourse. Franklin (2019), however, is one of the few scholars that criticises the use of identities in designations of positive and negative representation in queerbaiting debates. I share her distrust of the use of identities in this way. This thesis extends her critique and utilises a queer theory-methodology to analyse how this in fact presents a refiguring of identity politics and demonstrates a shift in queer political subjectivity.

Judith Butler's (1990) poststructuralist deconstruction of gender identity formation is one of the foundational tenets of queer theory and cultural studies. Her theory of "gender performativity" draws on the works of Foucault (1980, 1983), positing that identity and subjectivity are discursively constituted via regimes of power and normalised through discourse. Butler argues that gender is constituted through the repetition of ritualised and stylised acts. She denaturalises gender and subjectivity, as one cannot know or be a gendered subject before or outside the discursive regimes of knowledge or discourses through which we are interpellated. Rather than a case of performances reflecting or stemming from an innate essence or impulse, for Butler it is through normalised and ongoing gendered performances that we come to know ourselves as a gender. Thus, identity and subjectivity are in a constant state of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being. In order to analyse queerbaiting, I will employ Butler's theory of performativity to examine what representational identity politics is *doing*, beyond what it is saying. The thesis is concerned with the questions of what assumptions are being made about textual meaning, queerness and identity, and what these assumptions are doing for contemporary queer political subjectivity.

This is not to suggest that because such identity categorisations are discursively produced they are not 'real.' 'Real' refers to the value and meaning for those who employ such categories as a practice of self-affirmation, community building or political mobilisation. A queer theoretical methodology, however, aims to deconstruct the meanings and effects that this value designation and mobilisation have on politics. This thesis approaches identity and subjectivity with a similar distrust of naturalising tendencies whilst nonetheless acknowledging the profound meaning, power and importance of such realities. Rob Cover's (2012a, 2012b, 2013) work on identity and queer youth offers a particularly useful approach for the study of queerbaiting. He argues that increased rates of suicidality amongst queer youth are not exclusively the result of non-heterosexuality or non-cisgender

status, but are partly the result of the structures that demand a coherent and regimented identity within narrow binary categories. He revisits this argument in his analysis of the recent proliferation of identity categories in online digital cultures and social networking sites (2019a, b). The new “taxonomy” of gender and sexuality may appear to challenge exclusionary binary frameworks; however, for Cover, it signifies the same profound impulse for self-affirmation, coherency and intelligibility that was present in queer youth suicidality discourse. Recent analyses have suggested that queerbaiting constitutes negative representation and forecloses possibilities of self-affirmation through representation (Duggan 2019; Roach 2019). No research has been conducted, however, that takes up the desires of fans for positive representation as objects of inquiry. This thesis aims to examine the drive for coherence and intelligibility within contemporary representational politics. I argue that this drive underlies the call of some scholars for queer imagery that provides positive self-affirmation for queer viewers. To achieve this aim, I will utilise a queer theoretical approach to analyse the discursive process through which identity and subjectivity are constituted within queerbaiting discourse.

Affect

Audience investment in queer representation, politics and fandom is the foundation for the proliferation of queerbaiting critique. Such investment is underpinned by notions of trauma and harm and can be understood through the lens of affect theory. Seigworth and Gregg write, “Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion” (2010, 1). The relationship between affect and emotion has been the subject of considerable scholarly analysis. Hoggett and Thompson argue that “affect” is concerned with more embodied, less conscious dimensions of feelings.

An affect such as anxiety is experienced in a bodily way, while an emotion such as jealousy is directed towards objects (a lover, a rival) which give it meaning, focus and intentionality. The distinctive thing about anxiety is the way in which its object constantly shifts from one thing to another, almost as if the object is secondary to the feeling. Thus, whereas emotion is embedded in discourse, affect appears to be more detached from it. (2012, 3)

Within queerbaiting discourse, affect is entangled in the political subjectivity of fans. It drives their investments in queer representation, their relationship to texts, and their

criticisms of media creators. This ‘drive’ is particularly important for theories of affect. The objects, systems, and ideologies towards which affect drives us are inherently political, according to theorists such as Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010). Affect is, of course, a fundamental aspect of all fandom. Cornell Sandvoss describes fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (2005, 8). Fiske, moreover, defines fandom as “an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture” (1992, 30). The fan communities at the centre of queerbaiting debates specifically are constituted around politics of affect. Kunstman argues that “online performative acts of naming an emotion can create communities of feelings ... as well as objects and subjects of feeling” (2012, 6). The naming of emotions and the collective mobilisation of affective politics in queerbaiting critique is at the heart of these fandoms. As we have seen, affect is crucial to conceptualisations of fandom and queerbaiting and will be a major focus of this thesis. I will employ theories of happiness (Ahmed 2010) and queer theories of the child (Edelman 2004; Stockton 2009) to examine how the performativity of affect underpins the relationship of fans to textual meaning, authenticity, queerness and identity.

Affective politics seems to underpin recent scholarly analyses of queerbaiting as well. Mueller suggests that the humour often observed in moments of queerbaiting creates “homophobic undertones” in the text (2015, 185). Fathallah’s definition of queerbaiting, cited earlier in this chapter, also demonstrates this focus on the exploitation, intentionality and harm of comedy in the face of queer readings: “[queerbaiting involves] emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes” (2015, 491). However, Elizabeth Bridges’ (2018) contribution to the special issue on queerbaiting presents the most striking example of the deployment of affective trauma politics. She focuses on the history of queer images on screen and the various legal codes and formal censorships that restricted or modified it. This history, Bridges argues, serves as evidence of the harm of queerbaiting as a continuation of a “punishing legacy.” Such a legacy involves queer characters being relegated to subtext or removed from the narrative entirely (often through death) if they venture into the denotative textual level. I am not suggesting that audiences do not experience pain from perceived queerbaiting, or that the trauma Bridges writes about is not real or indeed worthy of attention and sympathy. I also acknowledge that causality of harm is much more complex than simply being the result of consumption of a text. I am, however, more concerned with what this deployment of affective politics is doing for contemporary queer political subjectivity. These studies

employ affective politics of trauma to criticise queerbaiting. Instead of reproducing these utilisations of affect, I will analyse the performativity of affect and what it is doing for contemporary politics, and modes of identification and subjectivity. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that queerbaiting critique reflects a contemporary queer political subjectivity that is deeply entangled with an impulse for an authentic, intelligible queer identity, shored up in media representation. I will employ poststructuralist theories of affect, particularly inspired by Ahmed's phenomenological analysis of emotions. Such analysis will focus on notions of happiness, harm, trauma and vulnerability, as they are deployed in contemporary queerbaiting politics.

Whilst queerbaiting is embedded in affective politics of harm and trauma, this thesis will also explore the ways in which pleasure operates. Seeing queerly might be seen as a reparative act born out of a need to survive, but it can also be the source of pleasure and playfulness. Hannah McCann writes that these pleasures can come from "identifying the queer in texts where queering, queer themes, or queer desires would otherwise be difficult to see," as well as "seeking out evidence of unexpected pleasures where they might not otherwise be perceived" (2016, 234). The pleasure largely lies in the perception of queerness being read by only those 'in the know'. This allows fans to carve out a queer space in the consumption of mainstream texts, knowing they have the ability to see and read queerness whereas heterosexual viewers are purportedly ignorant of such meanings. Within queerbaiting discourse, however, this pleasure and act of seeing queerly cannot be separated from contemporary representational politics grounded in notions of identity, authenticity and intentionality. Contemporary queerbaiting discourse tends to downplay pleasure in favour of a politics of harm, trauma and negative affect.

As noted above, Joseph Brennan's (2018) essay takes up the issue of pleasure's erasure and calls for an alternative to the term "queerbaiting." He suggests that the term is too embedded in notions of harm. Instead, he proposes the term "slashbaiting" to highlight these same moments of homoeroticism as sites of potential playfulness. He focuses on the production of slash fiction by gay male fans and accounts for the pleasure they might experience in the same moments that invite criticism from other fans. In these moments, it is the production of slash fiction that is being baited, not the desire to see explicit queer representation. He presents an interesting approach to the study of this phenomenon by rejecting the traditional conception of queerbaiting as inherently harmful and negative. As I have explained, this thesis will also avoid the trappings of reproducing affective trauma politics and instead analyse what the use of these politics says about contemporary political

subjectivity. Whilst Brennan's proposal of "slashbaiting" is useful in its attempt to redress the erasure of pleasure, this thesis will not propose an alternative to the term queerbaiting. Instead, I will utilise affect and queer theories to analyse the impulse to name such a tactic in the first place. Emily Roach similarly criticises the use of queerbaiting to refer to actor/singer Nick Jonas⁴ and insists that he is instead engaging in "performative allyship." Similarly, I will not engage in a policing of the term's usage. Rather, I am interested in the ways in which queerbaiting is used and the performativity of such engagement. There has yet to be any significant study of queerbaiting that analyses the performativity of its politics and the implications for contemporary notions of identity, queerness and subjectivity. Such discourses are produced and reproduced by fans whose accusations and criticisms construct debate. The voices of fans are therefore foundational for any analysis of queerbaiting. Currently, however, no research exists that speaks to fans directly and allows their voices to be the focus of analysis. This thesis is the first scholarly inquiry to conduct interviews with fans. The following section details the methods and methodology utilised for this research project.

Queer theory-methodology

The previous section examined current approaches undertaken by scholars researching queerbaiting and relevant intersecting bodies of literature. This section will outline in greater detail the methods and methodologies I utilise in this thesis. I will expand upon poststructuralist theories of queer readings, identity and affect presented in the previous section, as well as briefly introduce critical race theories of intersectionality and whiteness, to illustrate how these theories informed my methodological approach to queerbaiting and methods of data collection. As Browne and Nash write, "Research 'methods' can be conceptualised as what is 'done', that is, the techniques of collecting data ... By contrast, methodologies are those sets of rules and procedures that guide the design of research to investigate phenomenon or situations; part of which is a decision about what methods will be used and why" (2010, 10–11). The thesis utilises a queer theory-methodology to analyse the implications and assumptions being made in queerbaiting discourse. Such a methodology is broadly interested in highlighting "the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations" (Browne and Nash 2010, 4). This methodology is

⁴ Chapter five will analyse the phenomenon of celebrity queerbaiting, paying particular attention to the Nick Jonas case study.

informed by the theories explored in the literature review and they will now be elaborated by paying particular attention to how they influenced my approach to queerbaiting and data analysis.

Queer theory, performativity and affect

Postmodernist and poststructuralist inspired queer theory informs the methodologies utilised in the thesis. The central aims of this research project are to analyse the performativity of queerbaiting and to interrogate the implications and assumptions being made in queerbaiting discourse. It aims to examine what such implications and assumptions are *doing* for contemporary queer politics and conceptualisations of queerness and identity, and how such ideas are being mobilised through affect. Performativity as a concept, first described by Austin (1962), refers to the capacity of language to constitute or consummate an act or action. A performative utterance may be the verdict of a judge, or an apology or verbal promise. When a baby is declared as a gender—“it’s a boy!” or “it’s a girl!”—a set of ritualised and stylised acts are enacted in accordance with such gender declaration. As highlighted in the previous section, this is the concept of gender performativity according to Butler (1990). The theory suggests that these repeated acts of *doing* gender work both to reflect and constitute gender, and that gender is itself performative. Moreover, gender is performatively enacted through what Butler (1990) calls the “heterosexual matrix,” that ensures that certain kinds of non-normative and queer gender and sexual identities are excluded from dominant frameworks of cultural intelligibility. Performativity opens up a space in my methodology to examine what the phenomenon of queerbaiting is *doing* for contemporary forms of subjectivity and notions of queerness, identity, and gender, sexual and racial normativity, and how such concepts are constituted through affective politics.

Performativity also allows me to analyse the function of truth. As noted above, postmodernism and poststructuralism have problematised the notion of a singular truth. Rather than aim to discover the truth of queer textual meaning—an endeavour that is fundamental to fans in queerbaiting discourse—this thesis will instead analyse the performativity of such declarations of truth. Postmodernist and poststructuralist inspired queer film theory provides a useful theoretical-methodological approach to observe and interrogate queerbaiting discourse. Such an approach, however, does not allow me to make concrete claims about how and why queerbaiting texts are being taken up. Instead, they allow me to analyse the multiplicity of textual meaning, the politics behind such practices

of interpretation, as well as their material and political effects. This tradition, most notably practiced by Doty (1993, 2000) and Dyer (1986, 1993, 2006), allows me to analyse the performativity of queer textual readings and examine what they are doing for contemporary forms of queer political subjectivity. As already noted, this thesis will not take as self-evident the existence of queerbaiting or dismiss the queer readings of fans as incorrect textual interpretations. My concern in this research is not what these queerbaiting texts mean in any definitive sense, but rather, I am interested in how multiple meanings are mobilised in queerbaiting debates. I will therefore analyse the performativity of concepts of truth and authenticity, and examine the effects of such declarations of textual meaning on contemporary queer politics and representation. For example, one participant, Miles, wrote that “right off the bat it’s already gay” when referring to the first episode of *Sherlock* (BBC 2010–2017). After listing things that they⁵ interpreted as gay, such as the discussion of Sherlock’s sexuality and John’s curiosity with Sherlock’s romantic interests, Miles declares that these moments are “queerbait ... what else could [they] be.” Miles definitively states that such textual meanings are gay and as such, effectively categorises these moments within the domain of creator intentionality. We can see here how notions of truth and the singularity of textual meaning is crucial for fans in identifying evidence of queerbaiting. I am not particularly interested if there is indeed something queer about Sherlock and John, but rather, I am more concerned with how notions of truth are foundational to contemporary conceptualisations of queerness in representational politics.

This research project also utilises affect in the tradition of both queer and feminist theory to analyse the performativity of queerbaiting discourse. This methodology allows me to examine how emotions are conceptualised and harnessed socially, culturally and politically. In the mid-1990s, some queer and feminist theorists invited a turn to affect in response to what was seen as a disconnect between theory and reality, seen as limitations of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer criticised the state of queer theory at the time:

Queer theorists ... appreciate the extent to which the texts of literature and mass culture shape sexuality, but their weakness is that they rarely, if ever, move beyond the text. There is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore ‘real’ queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of texts. (1994, 184)

⁵ “They” pronouns are used for non-binary participants.

If postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas of deconstruction led to the destruction of the subject, affect and emotions are seen to have little to do with such practices (Clough 2008).

Critical theory's turn to affect encouraged a return to the body (Clough 2008; Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013). This focus on the body, enacted by the deconstructive practices of queer theory, paved way for more liberating notions of subjectivity. Sedgwick (2003) suggests that this turn to affect could reverse the effects of trauma. Similarly, Clough argues that the focus on the body that affect proposes is "freer" and more malleable than psychoanalytic theorisations of the body's drive (2008, 15). Teresa Brennan pays attention to the body by asking "is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" (2004, 1). The focus on the body in analyses of affect and emotion, in particular public feelings of shame, has provided a significant contribution to the study of race (Ahmed 2004), and sexuality and citizenship (Berlant 1997). These studies highlight the ways that affect shapes bodies and directs them to particular objects and ideals. Ahmed (2004, 2010) defines affect as a collective "energy" that "sticks" between objects and ideals. Rather than viewing emotions as internal feelings that we externalise, for Ahmed, emotions are attached to things that drive us towards or away from them. This idea of drive is particularly important for my approach to queerbaiting. Focusing on affect enables me to analyse what is driving fans towards particular texts. For example, Miles stated that they watched *Sherlock* because they were "down and blue just like [Sherlock and John] were and the possibility that they could be together and be happy was a very comforting thought ... seeing them together would be a message equivalent to 'being queer and being happy are possible.'" By analysing affect in this quote we can see how notions of happiness are utilised to demonstrate the importance of 'positive' representation and the harm, therefore, that is caused by queerbaiting. Happiness itself is what orients fans like Miles to particular texts. It is therefore happiness that provides the rubric through which standards of representation are measured and the foundation for much of queerbaiting politics.

In the foreword to *The Affective Turn* (2007), Michael Hardt writes,

Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers. (ix)

This theory of affect encourages an examination of the ways emotions orient us towards or away from things in the realm of the social, cultural and political, ultimately shaping us and the world around us. This is a significant contribution to my methodology. Queerbaiting discourse, as it is reproduced in online digital cultures, is underpinned by emotional investments in queerness, identity, representation and politics. As explored in the previous section, scholarly accounts of queerbaiting have tended to focus on exploitation, representational harm, or the authenticity of queer textual meanings. An approach that utilises poststructuralist and queer theories of affect allows me to take a step back and analyse the performativity of queerbaiting discourse, to analyse how affect is simultaneously shaping and being shaped by contemporary politics of queerness, identity and representation.

The affective turn in queer, feminist, and cultural theory was an attempt to turn to material realities, to bodies and emotions in order to theorise social, cultural and political worlds. This turn to the material world and the performativity of practices and acts, or as Annemarie Mol (1999) writes, “ontological politics,” provides a useful approach for my study. The affective turn was in part a response to the tradition of cultural studies research that tended to “not pay enough attention to the material realities of queer life” (Halberstam 1998, 10). Whilst I consider this thesis to belong to the field of queer cultural studies, I draw from queer-feminist scholarship on affect to probe further the material-affective dimensions of queer lives animated by the politics of queerbaiting.

Theories of intersectionality and whiteness have also informed many queer methodological approaches to the material-affective dimensions of queer lives. Intersectional theory opens up spaces to examine the experiences, embodiments, identifications and power relations shaping queer lives in a multitude of ways beyond the dimension of sexuality. As a theoretical approach, intersectionality was spearheaded by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. She extends earlier black feminist critiques and highlights how black women experience oppression at an intersection of axes of power. Although identity-based political movements can be productive in their organising, Crenshaw argues that they must account for the ways in which patriarchy and racism, for example, are experienced intersectionally, rather than as singular forces of oppression. Although her theory accounted for the intersection of race and gender specifically, it has been applied to various identity differences and axes of analysis. This thesis mobilises an intersectional approach to analyse the ways in which audiences

experience identity, subjectivity, and identification with queer representation and politics. Moreover, I utilise critical theories of race and whiteness to examine how queerness is embodied within queerbaiting texts and politics. Whiteness studies aims to deconstruct (and critique) the dominance of whiteness at cultural and structural levels (McCann and Monaghan 2019). The politics of race and whiteness is important for the study of queerbaiting and for queer theory more broadly, with some scholars critical of queer theory's construction of the queer subject as white, cisgender and male. I interrogate a similar centring of whiteness in queerbaiting texts and their reception. Utilising intersectional and critical theories of race and whiteness, the thesis challenges the presumption of singular modes of identification and access to texts, exposing a queer subjectivity entangled with whiteness.

Queer scholars have long noted that there is no unified theory or methodology that can be called *a* queer approach to research (Jagose 1996; McCann & Monaghan 2019). Indeed, queer approaches arguably challenge any rigid notion of coherence and any easy distinction between theory and methodology; hence my use of the hyphenated form “queer theory-methodology” and my assemblage of a range of conceptual tools. Halberstam (1998), for example, argues that his own approach is “queer” because it presents a “disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods” (10) and it “refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (13). Queer approaches also bring together a range of theoretical and methodological tools and tendencies that have emerged out of recent histories of postmodernist and poststructuralist criticism, lesbian and gay studies, and feminist theory (among others) and repurpose them for queer aims and ends. Butler's theory of performativity is a case in point. An assemblage of linguistic speech act theory, poststructuralism-deconstruction, and Foucauldian genealogy, Butler's theory of performativity has been trailblazing in consolidating a set of queer theoretical-methodological tendencies that have become highly influential in queer studies.⁶ Among the more obvious of these queer tendencies that animate this thesis are the denaturalisation and destabilisation of categories of gender, sexuality and identity generally, the exposure and analysis of heteronormativity (and binary oppositions such as hetero/homosexuality), and the analysis of the reiterative (and affective) enactment of subjectivity and identity. In following Butler's lead, and in splicing her theory of performativity with queer affect theories, queer theories of

⁶ I am not suggesting here that Butler invented queer theory, only that she has been highly influential in the field of queer studies. For a recent account of the broader historical and theoretical influences informing queer theories, see McCann and Monaghan (2019).

childhood, and critical race theories of whiteness and intersectionality, this thesis assembles what I call a queer theory-methodology aimed at interrogating the ways queer identities and queerness are being performatively enacted discursively, temporally, affectively, and intersectionally.

The thesis draws from qualitative sociological research methods. As such, the primary form of data collection I utilise is interviews, supplemented by social media and online articles. Rather than revealing a person's 'truth,' these interviews with fans provide insight into the ontological politics of queerbaiting and queer becoming. These fans are attempting to alter the world of queer representation through various affective enactments. My aim in interviewing fans is to uncover the variety of ways they are attempting to enact change in the world (of politics, of power relations, of representation, of emotions, of embodied subjectivity) and what these enactments reveal about shifting contemporary understandings of queerness. Boellstorff writes that interview data can usefully be considered as "theorizations of social worlds" (2010, 220). I take a similar approach to my interview data through the lens of ontological politics. Performativity and affect theories allow me to view this data as illustrating how fans grapple with and attempt to shape and transform the world of media representation and politics, revealing interesting notions of causality and transformations in forms of queer political subjectivity.

Social media and online articles

Both methods of data collection received ethics approval from the La Trobe University Ethics Committee.⁷ In researching a particular television show or queerbaiting controversy, relevant hashtags on Twitter and Tumblr were searched. The first 100 tweets/posts were analysed for relevant themes. Relevant tweets/posts were then screenshotted, de-identified and stored in Microsoft Word. To supplement this research, online articles were also considered for a particular queerbaiting controversy. Relevant key words were searched in Google, for instance "Supernatural + queerbaiting." Many of the tweets referenced in this thesis were taken from these articles and similarly screenshotted, de-identified and stored in Microsoft Word. Such tweets are referenced as quoted by the author of the article. Despite all social media data being posted to a publicly accessible site and able to be viewed without the need for an account, there are still ethical considerations to be made regarding anonymity and privacy (see Fiesler and Proferes 2018; Ravn, Barwell and Neves 2020).

⁷ Reference number S17-187.

As such, social media data cited in this thesis omits any names. This data provides a useful insight into some of the fan reactions to particular queerbaiting controversies at the time. Such controversies might include the announcement of the character “John” being played by a woman in the American version of *Sherlock*, or the death of Lexa in the TV show *The 100*. Data gathered from social media and online articles are weaved together with interview data throughout this thesis.

Interviews

No scholarly investigation into queerbaiting has spoken to fans directly and allowed their voices to be the focal point of analysis. Instead, existing investigations are largely based in fandom studies that tend to view general fan behaviour as resistive and subversive. Relying too heavily on textual analysis alone runs the risk of essentialising queerbaiting accusations and overestimating their resistive and subversive potential. Although existing investigations have utilised quotes from fans on social media, to my knowledge there has yet to be any systematic research conducted that utilises qualitative interviews. It became clear early on in my candidature that this thesis would benefit greatly from speaking with fans involved in queerbaiting debates. What does the naming of queerbaiting as a criticism say about contemporary politics surrounding queer visibility, fandom, authorship and agency in an increasingly digital age? How are fans reading, conceptualising, and mobilising queerness within queerbaiting debates? How are the investments and orientations of fans and their affective responses to queerbaiting understood, informed and/or reinforced by representational politics? In order to answer these questions, this thesis analyses the thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences of fans explored in qualitative interviews.

It is the fans themselves that are reproducing queerbaiting discourse. Their voices, therefore, play a significant and important focus of my analysis. However, by stating that fans are reproducing queerbaiting discourse I am not suggesting that queerbaiting does not exist in the intentions of media creators, or that fans are simply seeing industrial tactics that are not there. Rather, I argue that queerbaiting presents a shift in the way audiences are consuming and conceptualising queer representation, and that this reflects shifts in the political economy of media production and forms of queer politics and subjectivity.

Part of the selection criteria for research participants, besides belonging to the fandom of a piece of media that has been accused of queerbaiting, was that they must have

actively engaged in their fandom by posting on fan forums/social media, communicated with other fans, or created fan art or fanfiction. These are the fans who are actively contributing to the reproduction of queerbaiting discourse.

The project information sheet (Appendix A) and call for participants (Appendix B) was shared amongst my personal social media and the social media accounts of my university research centre; however, the majority of the participants were recruited via Reddit and Tumblr. For these sites, an account was set up devoted to the research project. For Reddit, this account was used to contact moderators of subreddits dedicated to television shows that have been accused of queerbaiting. I contacted the moderators to ask permission to post and to answer any questions they may have about the project. Not all moderators gave me permission, as they did not want to create conflict amongst their visitors about the topic of queerbaiting. I only posted on subreddits whose moderators gave me permission first. This proved helpful when, in one particularly heated series of comments amongst users, the moderators were able to publicly support me, delete the abusive comments, and clarify that I did indeed receive permission to post.

Reddit consists of pages/sites where anyone can post and these are moderated by several people; however, Tumblr is a microblogging site that contains individual blogs whose text posts, images/GIFs and videos are 'liked' or 'reblogged.' I created a Tumblr account that contained information about the research project, the call for participants and a link to a website with more information. I then messaged Tumblr users whose blogs were devoted to texts that have been accused of queerbaiting, asking if they would like to share the post on my Tumblr blog with information for potential participants to all of their followers. This was helpful as even if the Tumblr users were not interested in participating in the project, they were eager to spread the word and encourage their followers to either participate or share with their followers and/or anyone who may be interested. The call for participants contained a link to a survey that asked for information about their age, gender identity, sexuality, and their participation in their fandom(s). I aimed to interview fans from a variety of different fandoms and thus the pre-interview survey was helpful for the selection of participants.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted via instant messaging via Skype and ranged from one to two and a half hours long with the average length being approximately one hour and forty-five minutes. Skype was chosen because at the time it was an easily recognisable and accessible platform. Instant messaging was a particularly useful method

of interviewing as it provided automatic transcripts that were then stored in Microsoft Word.

However, and more importantly I would argue, the instant messaging discussions allowed for fans to communicate their opinions, thoughts and experiences in the same mode through which they engage in their fandom. Conducting the interviews in the same manner allowed for a richness of data that corresponded to the production of many of the queerbaiting debates that are the object of analysis. This was central to my methodological approach of engaging with fans of a community that is largely constituted online, with our communication somewhat resembling their own interaction with queerbaiting debates. I found Tom Boellstorff's chapter, "Queer Techne" (2010), especially insightful regarding this approach to researching digital communities. "[O]ne legitimate strategy for research in virtual worlds," he writes, "is to conduct that research wholly 'within' the virtual world in question. A methodologically fatal implication of any attempt to dissolve the virtual/actual binarism is to contend that no method for studying a virtual world is valid unless it involves meeting one's interlocutors in the actual world as well" (228–229). Although fandoms are not the "virtual worlds" that are the object of Boellstorff's research, they are largely constituted and reproduced online. Discarding the notion that this form of sociological inquiry is only useful or indeed valid unless interviews are conducted face-to-face proved significant for my approach.

Another benefit of conducting the interviews online was that it allowed for greater reach of recruitment. Fifteen of the participants were from the United States, four from Australia, two from Italy, two from Brazil and one from Poland. The age of fans ranged from twenty to fifty-three years old. Sixteen participants identified as cisgender women, three as cisgender men, one as a transgender man, and four as non-binary people. Three participants identified as heterosexual or straight, and the rest identified as either gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual or questioning. Twenty-two of the participants disclosed their ethnic/cultural background as White or Caucasian, with one as Asian/Chinese and one as Italian. The overwhelming whiteness of the responses is clearly a limitation of this study, and speaks to the larger erasure of people of colour both in fandom studies research and in fandom itself (Pande 2018).⁸

The interviews were semi-structured, whereby the interview was guided by a schedule of questions but left room for exploration and further investigation of interesting and important areas (see Burck 2005; Smith and Osborn 2008). This method ensures that

⁸ The function of whiteness in queerbaiting will be examined in chapter five.

all significant areas are covered in the interview but also allows the dialogue to be more flexible. Conducting the interviews through instant messenger may present the challenge of a lack of vocal, facial and bodily cues, but it does allow for a level of comfort for the participants that might not be possible otherwise. Kazmer and Xie (2008) argue that this method could potentially allow participants to feel more comfortable with the increased sense of anonymity, and the ability to think and key their responses. I believe that maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was of paramount importance to their comfort and their generosity in participating in the interviews. Therefore, when analysing the data, I omitted any personal identifying information where possible. As Saunders et al. (2014) point out, maintaining confidentiality involves taking steps to keep the identities of participants unknown to readers, which may include considering omitting names, places, occupation, and family relationships.

One obvious step to respect the confidentiality of participants was to use pseudonyms in the thesis. When allocating pseudonyms for fans, however, I encountered a problem of trying to maintain anonymity whilst respecting gender and cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Do I respect the country of origin of each participant and allocate a pseudonym that reflects that? Is that identifiable? Is their country of origin necessary for data analysis, or indeed, context for the reader of this thesis? However, what would be the implication of giving all of the participants Anglicised names? Further, four participants identified as non-binary; however, some of them had names that are traditionally gendered. Do I provide a gender-neutral pseudonym or a name that is similarly traditionally gendered to respect the name they gave me? All of these questions were important to consider not only to respect and protect the participants, but also to question what is relevant for interpretation of the data and what is necessary context for the reader.

To address these concerns, I decided to allow the participants themselves to choose which pseudonyms they would like me to use when referring to their responses in the thesis. This would allow them to choose how they would like their pseudonym to be gendered or culturally/ethnically coded, along with any other thought they may put into their choice. Allen and Wiles argue that giving participants this choice is a “vital element” of establishing research partnerships with participants (2016, 163). Further, they observe that “the care and thought with which many participants chose their names [in their study], and the meanings or links associated with those names, illustrated the importance to the participants of the process of naming” (154).

The interviews were analysed for emerging themes and patterns, and stored and coded using Microsoft Word. As noted above, queer theory, and theories of performativity and affect were used to analyse my conversations with fans. Four major themes were uncovered. The first major theme is queer readings, that is, how interpretations of queer meaning are being practiced in contemporary fandom. This theme is explored in chapter two which utilises queer film theories and queer theoretical critiques of identity politics. Chapter three deals with the second major theme of the politics of the child. For example, Miles stated that queer people “deserve representation and we deserve entertainment that serves us. Think about the children growing up never seeing that and thinking it’s impossible. I was one of them.” Queer theories of the child allow me to analyse this quote by not accepting the truth of queerbaiting’s harm to children, but to examine the impulses behind such a centring of children within queerbaiting politics. What implications about politics and affect are being made in such a use of an image of a child? The third major theme was the frequent use of happiness by fans as a rubric to measure queer representation and to demonstrate the failure of queerbaiting to meet their standard. Many fans stated that positive queer representation included queer characters that are happy and receive happy endings. Poststructuralist affect theories, informed by Ahmed (2004, 2010), provide a useful methodology to analyse this theme. I use this methodology in chapter four to examine the performativity of these affective politics and how the drive towards happiness represents a desire for an intelligible, coherent and authentic queerness. The final major theme explored in chapter five is the motivation of fans towards queerbaiting texts. One fan, Chiisana, writes that “When I was growing up, before there was an internet, there were very few examples of anyone who wasn’t a straight white able-bodied dude being seen as worthy of being the centre (or even often the periphery) of a story. Everyone should be the center of the story of their own life.” Utilising queer theory and critical race theories of whiteness and intersectionality, I analyse what drives fans towards certain queerbaiting texts over other texts with explicitly or more manifestly queer characters. Such a methodology allows me to analyse how queerness is positioned at the centre of narrative and power within queerbaiting discourse and how, as a result, whiteness is deeply embedded in conceptions of queerness.

Chapter outline

This thesis attempts to reframe contemporary debates around queerbaiting. It does so by opening them up to wider discourses through which accusations and criticisms of queerbaiting, and their subsequent responses, are discursively constituted and reproduced. The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, entitled “Historicising the Emergence of Queerbaiting,” traces the history of the shifting contexts and conditions that led to the rise of queerbaiting as a named phenomenon. In order to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary arguments against queerbaiting, this chapter historicises the relationship between audiences and queer media. It argues that queerbaiting is inevitably entangled in this history of the politicisation of queer images and identifies four main influences and antecedents: (1) the emergence of slash fiction fan communities in the 1970s; (2) the practice of coded marketing to gay and lesbian consumers (“gay window advertising”) and the construction of the gay and lesbian market during the 1970s–1990s; (3) assimilationism, homonormativity and the positive imaging debates during the “explosion” of gay and lesbian material on US network television in the 1990s; and (4) the advent of the internet and social media, and its effect on online fan cultures in the 2000s. By analysing this history, chapter one argues that queerbaiting is a distinctly contemporary moment that reflects a changing mode of political subjectivity and significant broader shifts in queer visibility politics, and the relationship between audiences and queer media.

The remaining chapters utilise the interviews with fans as the primary focus of analysis, beginning this analysis is chapter two, entitled “The ‘Queer’ in Queerbaiting.” Drawing on queer theory and poststructuralist inspired queer film scholarship, this chapter examines how fans understand sexuality, and how they are conceptualising, reading and mobilising queerness. My discussion is guided by questions of what queerness looks like for these fans and how are they utilising it in their debates around queerbaiting? In answering these questions, I argue that there is a tension in queerbaiting within the meaning and function of “queer” in textual readings and in political investments of fans in media visibility. Through an analysis of how fans are seeing queerly and how they conceptualise their own practice of queer readings, I propose that within queerbaiting debates, fans have refigured and objectified queerness as singular and definitively defined. Fans utilise “queer” as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community (to call for greater diversity in media) and understand it as the embodiment of same-sex desire represented by an identity label. What follows from this, I suggest, is a re-centring of the Author as holding power

over meaning-making. This re-centring presents shifts in political subjectivity whereby the saliency of “queer” and the dismantling of heteronormativity via ‘positive’ queer representation are tied to the power of the Author figure. This subjectivity is embodied through the mobilisation of affect, the singularity of (queer) textual meaning, and the distancing of pleasure, playfulness or empowerment so evident in earlier forms of queer fandom.

Chapter three, entitled “Representational Harm and the Queer Child,” offers an examination of the politics of the child within queerbaiting critique. One of the major themes that emerged from the interviews was the significance of media visibility being understood through the figure of a child. When discussing queer representation, fans frequently referred to an image of an imagined queer child (or their own childhood experience) whose formative years are being shaped by representation, both positively (through positive representation) and negatively (through negative representation such as queerbaiting). Drawing on affect theory and scholarship that analyses the politics of the child, particularly in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991), Lee Edelman (2004) and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), this chapter evaluates the function of the child within queerbaiting critique. Queerbaiting politics is deeply entangled with notions of pain, injury and trauma. This harm, according to fans, is affected partly because queerbaiting is seen to close off possibilities of happy, queer adulthoods for young queer viewers. I argue that this reflects an impulse in fans to conceive of an authentic, intelligible and coherent queerness shored up in media representation. In this argument, fans conceive of children as operating without power. Power in such contexts is understood as a means or mode of possessing knowledge of the liveability of queerness in adulthood. This chapter proposes that what flows from this claim is the reinforcement of a liberationist model of power in which the (adult) creators are seen as having power over meaning-making and the production of texts, thereby possessing knowledge of queer adulthoods through representation/queer images. This will provide the basis in the following chapter for a consideration of the ways in which fans are conceptualising ‘positive’ representation.

Chapter four, entitled “Representation, Temporality and Happiness,” explores the function of happiness and orientation towards the future in queerbaiting politics. Happiness was a clear reference point through which fans designated positive or negative representation. Images of happy queers with happy endings were deemed positive, whereas queerbaiting or the “bury your gays” trope in which queer characters received little airtime or did not receive a happy ending (often via death) was seen as negative and, thus, harmful.

Drawing on affect theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's conception of happiness (2010), this chapter will explore the political implications of these notions of 'good' and 'bad' representation. Moreover, happiness and futurity will present the foundation for an examination of the queer temporalities present in queerbaiting. Drawing on Eve Ng's "queer contextuality" (2017), Evangeline Aguas' analysis of queerbaiting (2019), and the notion of "queer time," I will argue that there is an affective pull within queerbaiting that undermines conventional linear logics of time. The act of decoding and predicting queerness, and the affective responses to queerbaiting undermine a normative, linear temporality. They do so by presenting unique temporal crossings between past, present and future. These crossings are driven by a history of trauma for queers that provides a unique vantage point through which they approach queerbaiting texts. This chapter will argue that there is an affective, temporal pull that underpins the political mobilisation of fans. Further, these affective orientations towards the future are informed by notions of happiness and provide the basis for the examination of a potential embrace of negative affect. Drawing on Heather Love (2009), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Michael Snediker (2009) and Jack Halberstam's (2011) theorisations of negative affect, this chapter will explore whether there is indeed space for such an embrace within contemporary queerbaiting politics.

Chapter five begins by asking the question of what orients fans to texts that are thought to queerbait? If such explicit queer representation exists in other texts, what is motivating and driving fans towards these texts, what baits them? This chapter, entitled "The Centre of the Story," will examine some of the significant theoretical and political impulses behind the orientations of fans towards texts and characters that are criticised for queerbaiting. I suggest that such impulses are underpinned by a desire to see, know and celebrate queerness at the centre of meaning-making. Such centring is seen in characters that drive the story and receive significant screen-time, rather than in supporting or token characters. This chapter will argue that whiteness is deeply entangled with such orientations towards the centre. Drawing on critical queer and race theories, I argue that queerness is imagined and celebrated through whiteness, where white bodies act as a blank canvas onto which queerness can be projected and read. However, in their conceptualisation of queer readings and criticism of the whiteness of fandom, many scholars and fans understand perceived visible 'likeness' between character and viewer as the ultimate means of identificatory access for audiences. I will argue that this notion of access enacts an essentialising of identity and a narrowing of the variety of subject positions through which we engage with/consume texts.

The phenomenon of celebrity queerbaiting will also be examined in this chapter to analyse the centring of queerness. Drawing on celebrity studies, particularly Richard Dyer (1986) and Michael DeAngelis' (2001) work on stardom, and John Mercer's (2013) theory of the male sex symbol, this chapter argues that celebrity queerbaiting discourse highlights a drive to see queerness as infiltrating the centre of mainstream culture. Within this centre, I will observe, is an investment in notions of authenticity and identity that close off possibilities of sexual fluidity. Following this chapter, and to conclude the thesis, I will briefly retrace my steps before offering critical suggestions for future engagement with queerbaiting and the politics of representation.

Chapter 1: Historicising the Emergence of Queerbaiting

Queerbaiting is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, but one with a history rooted in shifting discourses and the politics of fandom, advertising, queer representation and digital media. This chapter explores the relationship between audiences and queer imagery on screen and traces the history of the politicisation of media. It highlights parallels of queerbaiting to historical discourses of politics around queer representation with similarities and differences elucidated.

Elizabeth Bridges (2018) uses the post-apocalyptic television drama, *The 100*, as a case study to analyse the broader television trope of “bury your gays.” This trope refers to the prevalence of gay and lesbian characters on screen being killed. Bridges criticises the BYG trope and argues that it is a continuation of the punishment of queers throughout history and reinforced in media representation. She writes that queerbaiting is “a historically situated phenomenon that in significant ways parallels reactions to nineteenth-century legal-medical discourse on the nature of homosexuality, and the subsequent punishment of it through enforcement of sodomy laws and/or blackmail against (primarily) gay men” (2018, 115). Bridges argues that the “punishing legacy” of censorship forbidding depictions of homosexuality in film and television in Hollywood (the “Hays Code”) continues today through queerbaiting:

BYG has a long history that is rooted in Hollywood censorship practices, which historically either erased homosexuality altogether or, if homosexuality was depicted at all, conveyed it exclusively through subtextual cues or through constructions of perversion. Indeed, even post-Code, queer-seeming characters were barred from experiencing happy endings at best, and met tragic or violent ends at worst, which was viewed by censors as the only morally acceptable way to depict homosexuality. (124)

According to Bridges, this legacy continues today. It is sustained by denying audiences explicit queer representation through the BYG trope and by relegating queer characters to subtext. The entanglement of queerbaiting with discourses of trauma and victimhood is clearly evident here, particularly in the project of historicising queer screen representation. *The 100* is a useful case study for Bridges as it initially escaped accusations of queerbaiting by writing its female protagonist into a same-sex relationship. However, after killing her love interest shortly thereafter, the show was subjected to criticisms of queerbaiting. Whilst Bridges argues that queerbaiting is a contemporary continuation of censorship and punishment, she does not directly connect this history to the emergence of queerbaiting.

This chapter, on the other hand, *will* trace the history of social, political, cultural and economic shifts that paved the way for the emergence of the phenomenon. It is important to note here that this chapter does not serve as the definitive history of queerbaiting. Rather, it highlights some of the antecedents to the current debates by tracing the politicisation of representation. It analyses how shifting politics are evident through discourses of fandom, advertising, television production, and the emergence of the internet and social media. Analysing the historical relationship between audiences and queer media in relation to contemporary queerbaiting highlights a changing mode of queer political subjectivity for audiences. This emergent subjectivity is explored throughout this thesis, paying particular attention to affect, authenticity and identity. What becomes clear in tracing this history is that contemporary politics around queerbaiting highlights a shift in political investments. Initial investments in the subversive power of queer readings and the potentially enjoyable acts of actualising queerness have shifted to a focus on diversity, identity and authenticity. For many contemporary audiences, the engagement in ‘subversive’ queer reading practices of apparently heterosexual characters is a particularly useful site to trace this subjectivity before the advent of the internet.

Slash fandom

Queerbaiting involves the purported exploitation of the investments of fans in pairings of same-sex characters in fictional media. Such pairings are often the object of fan activity due to perceived homoeroticism or subtextual queerness. Slash fiction or “slash” is a genre of fanfiction that actualises this homoeroticism. The emergence of slash fandom can be traced to the mid-1970s, coinciding with increased visibility of lesbian and gay people in the social and political sphere. Slash fiction was largely disseminated at conventions through fanzines and often sparked back-and-forth discussion with some fans vehemently opposed to any form of queer interpretation (Callis 2016, 1.5). Within queerbaiting discourse, this practice has fundamentally shifted from playful subversion and transgression seen in the 1970s to 1980s to accusations of exploitation and homophobia steeped in affective politics. What we see in the 1970s is the emergence of slash communities centred on their love of seeing and creating stories of men loving men—a playful subversion of heteronormative media. Fans began to organise and unite through a shared interest in queer readings of popular science fiction texts. Queerbaiting emerged as

a critique from these communities that bond over their investments in seeing queer characters in media, the beginnings of which originated with the *Star Trek* slash fandom.

Early scholarship on slash mainly focused on heterosexual women's interest in consuming and producing slash fiction about men, particularly as it relates to subversion of gender and sexual norms (Bacon-Smith 1992; Salmon and Symons 2004; Woledge 2004).⁹ Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) ethnographic study of female *Star Trek* fans in the mid-to-late 1980s was one of the first accounts of this community and the practice of slash. Subversion was a key theme in her study. She noted that the illegality of fanfiction fuelled these women's sense of community, secrecy and subversion. They 'stole' characters and settings from networks for their fanfiction, infringing copyright laws at the time. However, as Bacon-Smith writes, copyright laws infringed were "only the mildest part of the subversion fomented in the ladies' literary group and terrorist society" (6). Many of the women felt that participating in their fandom helped express feelings of difference and otherness while at the same time experiencing an overarching sense of risk in their participation (205). The risk exists for women whose careers or social capital might be jeopardised if their interests were exposed. To contain this risk, Bacon-Smith observed many women using pseudonyms, particularly in Kirk/Spock fandoms in which their interests could be interpreted as erotic (207).

The impulse to recognise the subversive potential of slash fiction mirrors wider queer and feminist politics at the time. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a trend in some queer and feminist political and academic circles towards analysing the liberating and deconstructive potential of subversion. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), for example, utilises Gayle Rubin's seminal essay *Thinking Sex* (1984) to suggest that sexuality is the domain for subversion and deconstruction rather than gender.¹⁰ This epistemological and methodological distinction, however, has been criticised by scholars such as Biddy Martin (1994) and Judith Butler (1994). Sedgwick's attempt to distinguish the two highlights this impulse to invest in ideas of subversion. The drive to locate sites upon which this subversion can take place is paramount for many academics and activists. As noted above, slash fiction presents a site for queer and feminist subversion of sexuality and gender for Bacon-Smith and other scholars of fandom studies. The political and theoretical orientations of this time highlight a focus on subversion that presents a contrast to

⁹ There has been significantly less scholarship focusing on men who engage in slash. For a discussion of this see Brennan (2013).

¹⁰ The politics of this distinction between sexuality and gender will be discussed at greater length in chapter five of this thesis.

contemporary queerbaiting politics. As we will see throughout this thesis, rather than see their queer readings as subversive or part of a polysemic text in which multiple and equal readings exist simultaneously, fans (and some scholars) involved in queerbaiting debates suggest their readings are evidenced in the primary diegesis of the show and are intended by the creators (Brummitt and Sellars 2019; Duggan 2019; Schneider 2019).

Scholars have focused a large part of their analyses on the question of why these women were producing or consuming slash fiction. Why might women want to homoeroticise the relationship between two male characters introduced as heterosexual? Some scholars position slash fiction as a means for women to envision egalitarian romances without the patriarchal dynamics and roles of traditional representations of heterosexual romance (Russ 1985; Penley 1991; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). In this way, slash has been described as a “queer female space” (Lothian et al. 2007, 103) and a “queer practice,” insofar as it is a “practice that problematizes clear straight/gay dichotomies” (Busse 2005, 122). Again, the impulse to locate sites of queer and feminist subversion is clear. These scholars also see slash fiction as a resistive, creative and active process that seeks to subvert the passive consumption of hegemonic mass culture. Recent work would also seem to support this claim. Lucy Neville (2015, 2018) highlights the sense of community that slash fandom has brought for women in her study. She notes how slash and male/male erotica encourages women to explore issues around their gender and sexuality, helps them discover and explore their own queer identity or makes them more aware of how they can be better allies. Neville proposes an undeniably feminist and queer intervention regarding the dominant understandings of women who consume gay male erotica. She criticises the idea that these women are either non-existent, appropriative or pathological. This erotica “subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values,” Neville writes, “providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, and encouraging many sex-positive values. Is it any wonder that some women like it?” (2015, 204). Through her interviews with women who enjoy viewing gay male pornography, she suggests they do so for a myriad of reasons. The most common one is that these women find men and the spectacle of two men having sex attractive or arousing (2018). Many of the women in Neville’s study spoke about the appeal of this erotica and why they did not find pleasure in viewing mainstream heterosexual pornography. The lack of a female perspective (the camera rarely focusing on the male performer), a perceived power imbalance, the exploitation of women and a focus on male pleasure were some of the grievances these women mentioned (2015, 199). Neville’s

analysis seeks to normalise women's interest in gay male erotica as part of the larger project of feminist sexual liberation.

Slash fiction still maintains this feminist potential and site of queer subversion for Neville, as it did for Bacon-Smith three decades earlier. However, contemporary slash fiction and slash fan communities cannot be separated from the increased visibility of politics surrounding media representation. Queerbaiting exists within these representational politics. Whilst some women in Neville's study may find that slash appeals to their queer and feminist sensibilities of subversion and transgression, the dynamic between audiences and media is inflected with notions of authenticity and diversity within a political climate of queerbaiting. Further, the pleasure that some fans may experience from slash cannot be separated from the mobilisation of affective politics in queerbaiting accusations and criticisms. Slash communities are no longer merely sites of queer and feminist subversion. Rather, as this thesis will demonstrate, they are bound to queerbaiting debates centred on diversity, authenticity and authorial intention.

Some scholars, however, are hesitant to accept the idea that slash fiction is inherently and always resistive and subversive (Scodari 2003; Hunting 2012). Scodari (2003) claims that much of the early scholarship on slash fiction generalises the fans as resistive to patriarchy when, in fact, slash fiction is much more diverse and nuanced. For example, slash can be seen as a feminist intervention into a genre that rarely depicts central female protagonists and egalitarian relationships without patriarchal dynamics and roles. However, with the influx of female characters in science fiction, male/male slash fiction can be read as problematic in its erasure of women (Scodari 2003, 125). Women in the context of slash are often viewed as the heterosexual obstacle to queerness. They are seen as preventing the possibility of homoeroticism ever becoming actualised in the diegesis. A contemporary addition to this argument is the controversial reimagining of the stories centring on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes. The Sherlock Holmes stories were adapted into a television series by the BBC in 2010 with Benedict Cumberbatch playing the titular character and Martin Freeman as his sidekick and other half of the slash ship "Johnlock," Dr John Watson. The series spawned a huge slash fandom and became one of the most prominent recipients of queerbaiting accusations and criticisms. When American network CBS aired a reimagining of the franchise with Lucy Liu playing the now female character of Dr Joan Watson, there was an outcry from many fans. Despite the potential positive implications of having an Asian-American female protagonist, fans argued that this gender swap was a negation of the homoeroticism that

made the BBC's *Sherlock* so popular. According to critics, the gender swap was evidence of CBS's "fear" to represent explicitly gay characters (Prudom 2012). The contradictions in contemporary queerbaiting critique are evident here when such criticisms rely on arguments of diversity and inclusion. Fans criticise queerbaiting often by asserting the importance of diversity in media representation. However, which identities take precedence in calls for diverse representation? The criticism of CBS's casting of Liu demonstrates that, for these fans, subtextual homoeroticism between two white men or the hope of one day seeing manifestly queer white men outweighs the potential positive effects of an Asian-American female protagonist in a primetime network series.¹¹

Whilst queer readings in the age of queerbaiting may still be transgressive and playful, they exist in a climate where the politics of queer visibility in media has fundamentally shifted from the times of Kirk/Spock. Whether directly engaging in queerbaiting debates or not, fan readings of queerness 'against the grain' of dominant, 'intended' readings cannot be separated from the contemporary politics of queerbaiting critique. Such politics are grounded in notions of identity, diversity and authenticity. Although they are still possible, the playful acts of subversion in media have been largely superseded by a politicisation of representation. This has paved the way for the emergence of queerbaiting. This politicisation sees fans accusing creators of intentionally trying to capitalise on queer audiences without running the risk of losing mainstream appeal. Such politicisation, however, is entangled with the emergence of "gay window advertising" and the "the pink dollar," explored in the following section.

Advertising and the gay and lesbian market

As noted in the previous chapter, contemporary understandings of queerbaiting frame the phenomenon as an intentional practice that exploits the desires of fans to read queerness from implied or coded hints and gestures, often, it is claimed, through marketing and false advertising. Queerbaiting debates are thus entangled with discourses of gay marketing that were first introduced decades earlier. In order to fully understand contemporary arguments against queerbaiting, we must situate them within a larger history of advertising and market segmentation.

¹¹ The problematic labelling of slash fiction or fandom in general as subversive or transgressive places of deconstructive potential will be examined further in chapter five of this thesis.

Many brands often surreptitiously and ambiguously marketed to gay and lesbian consumers, like current media creators are accused of doing. By the 1970s, advertisers were forced to alter their marketing tactics from appealing to an imagined mass public to more strategic, targeted advertising (Sender 2004). No longer did they view the public as unified by shared values in the wake of World War II and the tensions of the Cold War. Instead, the public was targeted in segmented groups with the acknowledgement of their different tastes, lifestyles and habits. Such fragmentation was partly due to the increased visibility of marginalised identities in social and political spheres. This market segmentation saw the transformation of social groups into consumer groups where identities were now presumed to predict consumer behaviour (Sender 2004). However, consumer groups do not represent a pre-existing identity or experience, but rather, consumer culture works to shape consumers in particular ways in order to make them more marketable and sellable. With that said, in analysing this history of consumer culture, it is important to acknowledge that whilst marketers attempted to capitalise on lesbians and gay men, they were constructed and marketed to differently as consumer (and social) subjects.

The formation of identity groups based on sexuality under capitalism is a primary factor that led to the emergence of gays and lesbians as a cautiously sought-after, trendsetting consumer group in the 1970s and 1980s. John D'Emilio (1983a) argues that politics based on sexual identity and the formation of urban communities of gay and lesbian people emerged due to certain economic and social conditions under capitalism. He explains that capitalist imperatives shifted the function of the family from labour production to providing intimacy and happiness. This allowed for some people to organise their personal (and political) lives around their erotic/emotional attractions. While of course there was same-sex sexual activity prior to the establishment of capitalism, there was no space in the economic sphere in the colonies for people to organise their lives around sexuality. The family was inextricably intertwined with the necessities of labour and production, not a means to organise around sexual identity. By the 1920s, however, the free-labour system had created the conditions for the white, middle-class family to become a symbol of personal fulfilment, intimacy and happiness. Economic independence from the heteronormative family allowed gay and lesbian people to organise socially and politically around their sexuality (see Altman 1982).

Market research into the gay and lesbian community in the 1970s and 1980s was another pivotal factor that influenced their subsequent emergence as a lucrative, hip, trendsetting segment of the market. The 'gay' consumer (largely assumed to be male) was

thought to have a higher disposable income to his heterosexual counterpart due to the presumption he had no children. This idea was based on market research conducted through American gay publications such as *The Advocate*, whose readership mainly consisted of white, affluent gay men with no children despite only representing a small part of the community (Baker 1997). *The Advocate's* readership survey found that their 1,100 respondents were mostly urban professionals between the ages of twenty and forty, with a higher than average income. A study was done again in 1988 by the Simmons Market Research Bureau which conducted a readers' survey of eight gay and lesbian newspapers that belonged to the National Gay Newspaper Guild. The study found that the average income for their readers was \$36,800 versus \$12,287 for the general population, with higher numbers of college degrees and managerial or professional jobs (Baker 1997, 12). In 1990, a Chicago marketing company, Overlooked Opinions, conducted their own research by mailing out a questionnaire completed by 1,357 gay men and lesbians (Baker 1997, 13). This study again demonstrated higher salaries and college degrees than the average population, despite the data only being representative of those who already read gay publications or who signed up to be interviewed at gay pride parades. The research was used to further convince mainstream advertisers to buy space in gay publications. However, this data also contributed to the myth of the affluent gay consumer as representative of the whole gay and lesbian community.

The loyalty of gay and lesbian consumers to brands specifically marketed to them became a "veritable legend" amongst advertisers (Gluckman and Reed 1997, 5). The most notable example was Absolut Vodka becoming the first in 1981 to advertise in gay publications such as *The Advocate* and *After Dark* (Edwards 2011). The brand's explicit targeting of the LGBTQ community is seen as partly contributing to its long-term success (Gluckman and Reed 1997; Edwards 2011). Their success encouraged other brands to advertise directly and explicitly to gay and lesbian consumers (Sender 2004, 29). Despite the threat of boycotts from religious groups to brands openly marketed to gays and lesbians, advertisers soon realised that gays and lesbians were a distinct consumer base with different interests than the religious right. Understandably then, the brands that tended to target gays and lesbians were not reliant on the religious consumer, such as makers of alcohol, cigarettes¹² or designer clothes (Sender 2004, 37). Exploiting gay and lesbian consumers

¹² Phillip Morris became the first US national tobacco brand to advertise in a gay magazine in 1992 (Baker 1997, 14).

as trendsetting, “hot commodities” (Hennessy 1994) started to outweigh the financial risks of right-wing, religious boycotts (Gluckman and Reed 1997, 3).

However, one of the issues faced by advertisers was the struggle to identify, measure and access the lesbian market. Attracting lesbians as a group by marketing to either heterosexual women or gay men failed (Sender 2004). The interpretation of market research findings constructed white gay men as hip, trendsetting and affluent. On the other hand, lesbians, and especially lesbian feminists, were often imagined as hostile to consumer practices that idealised family or fashion. Lesbians were also seen as less profitable than gay men (Sender 2004, 185). Advertisers did attempt to target this seemingly less profitable group—albeit far less than their gay male counterparts—however the imagery used is thought by some to have been designed by and for the straight male gaze (Clark 1991).

Whilst certain brands had accepted that the gay and lesbian market was a viable consumer group to be targeted, the AIDS crisis during the 1980s to 1990s fundamentally altered the way the public (and advertisers) viewed gay people, particularly gay men. The AIDS crisis reinvigorated old notions of homosexuality as criminal, diseased and pathological. Gluckman and Reed suggest that the AIDS crisis motivated a large group of white, middle-class gay men into political activism (1997, 7). Despite being symbols of hip, stylish consumerism, these men were suddenly fearful of losing housing or medical coverage, prompting them to come out and fight for progressive politics. Their abject sexuality could no longer be ignored in favour of their hip, trendsetting sensibilities. Whilst brands still relied on the myth of the affluent gay consumer as a necessary target, they had to avoid being perceived as ‘too gay’ or illustrating political allegiance to the gay rights movement during this time. One way of navigating this dilemma for marketers was the practice known as “gay window advertising.”

“Gay window advertising”¹³ refers to the strategy by which advertisers use coded signifiers of gayness to attract gay and lesbian consumers without being noticed by heterosexual consumers (Bronski 1984; Oakenfull et al. 2008; Tsai 2012). This advertising strategy uses vague or coded imagery in which the sexuality of the person, or the relations between the people in the advertisement remain intentionally ambiguous in order for the gay or lesbian consumer to read same-sex attraction from the image, with the straight consumer supposedly remaining ignorant. Advertisers were able to tap into gay and lesbian

¹³ Although gay window advertising also applies to lesbian imagery, I will continue to use the term “gay” as it is the discursive phrase used in the marketing industry as well as the literature analysing the strategy, whilst also acknowledging the problematic implications of such erasure (see Clark 1991, 186).

consumers without ever revealing their aim. This allowed for plausible deniability. When questioned about their gay window advertising, a spokesperson for *Calvin Klein* stated, “We did not *try* to appeal to gays. We try to appeal, period. If there’s an awareness in that community of health and grooming, then they’ll respond to the ads. You really want to reach a bigger market than just gays, but you don’t want to alienate them” (quoted in Bronski 1984, 180, original emphasis). Peter Fressola, then director of North American communications for fashion brand *Benetton*, stated, “there’s a joke in the gay community about ‘gaydar,’ ... and I’m gay, so I can talk about this. There’s a sensibility ... that tips you off” (quoted in Sender 1999, 173). Some of the ways that advertisers tapped into this sensibility was by choosing to include only one model in an advertisement, rather than a differently sexed couple, and using androgynous hands and rainbow flags/colours (Sender 1999).

However, gay window advertising is not practiced solely to attract a gay and lesbian market without flaming the hatred of the religious right. Rather, subtextual, vague hints at ‘gayness’ can attract heterosexual consumers as well. As Michael Bronski wrote in the 1980s, “Of course the images cannot be too blatant, because blatant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the exotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential” (1984, 186). Although Bronski’s analysis of gay sensibilities is almost exclusively concerned with gay men, “lesbian window advertising,” whether it’s playing up the butch/femme dynamic or simply using androgynous, masculine or ‘edgy’ female models, can be seen as ‘chic’ and appealing to heterosexual men and women (Altman 1982; Clark 1991; Haineault and Roy 1993; Sender 1999). ‘Hidden’ homosexuality provides brands with the exoticism of queerness, the titillating excitement of the queer fantasy of gay identities and subcultures.

Part of the appeal of gay window advertising comes from advertising polysemy in which multiple meanings can be interpreted from the same image by different audiences (Puntoni et al. 2010). Sender explains that

while groups who identify with a non-dominant sexual subjectivity are gaining increasing interest from marketers, advertisers continue to be notoriously conservative, especially when it comes to potentially alienating a segment of their existing market. The result has been the phenomenon of gay window advertising, where images are coded with subtexts which are intended to be understood by lesbian, gay and bisexual readers as ‘lesbian’ and/or ‘gay’ and/or ‘bisexual’ texts, but which are assumed to remain innocuous to heterosexual readers. (1999, 173)

Gay window advertising is an antecedent to current debates surrounding queerbaiting as a marketing tactic. Sender's explanation of gay window advertising echoes many of the sentiments expressed by Judith Fathallah in her definition of contemporary media queerbaiting cited in the previous chapter.

Queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes. (2015, 491)

Fathallah's definition supports the claims of many fans who assert that creators of media, primarily motivated by financial risk/gain, are intentionally injecting subtextual cues of non-heterosexuality as a marketing tactic. Referring to both gay window advertising and queerbaiting respectively, Sender and Fathallah point to the apparently intentional use of subtextual or implicit signifiers of same-sex attraction in order to appeal to a seemingly gay or lesbian consumer. Such attraction is ensured without alienating potentially homophobic consumers or heterosexual consumers that may then read the media or brand as 'gay' or 'lesbian.' Morley (1993) proposes the idea of a "structured polysemy" in which multiple meanings can exist within a text that can be decoded differently by different audiences. Fiske (1989) also positions polysemy as a valuable tool for producers of media to target a generalised and broad audience. Structured polysemy has been taken up by advertisers as an effective method of targeting lesbian and gay people without alienating heterosexual consumers. Many advertisers believe that sexual subjectivities directly affect the reading practices of consumers. Lesbian and gay people will purportedly bring a particular knowledge and awareness of coded signifiers of 'gayness'—certain representations that correspond with their experience—that heterosexual consumers will not notice.

In attempts to distance themselves from overt connections to gay rights and lesbian and gay consumers generally, brands engaged in gay window advertising for strictly "business, not politics" (Sender 2004). A spokesperson for the bottled water company *Naya Waters* stated that "this is not a political decision to go after the gay niche. It was a business decision" (quoted in Sender 2004, 2). Similarly, a spokesperson from the beer brewing company *Miller* said, "We market to gays and lesbians for business reasons, because we want to sell our product to consumers. It doesn't get more complicated than that" (quoted

in Sender 1999, 173). It is clear that these companies wanted to capitalise on the gay and lesbian market without being perceived as aligning themselves with gay and lesbian politics. Remaining 'neutral' allowed them to attract a wider demographic. By the 1980s, gay publications realised that they needed large advertisers to survive, not just small brands willing to solely target gay and lesbian consumers (Baker 1997, 12). Seeking to ease the trepidations of companies about the political implications of advertising to gay and lesbian consumers, gay publications began desexualising a lot of their content (Sender 2004, 33). However, the AIDS crisis saw the separation of gay male identity from sex becoming all the more difficult to accomplish (Becker 2006). The desexualisation of content in gay publications worked to construct an image of the gay and lesbian community, particularly gay men, as more palatable consumer subjects who did not engage in sex or politics. Instead, these subjects focused their energy on using their large, disposable incomes on consuming products that reinforced their hip lifestyle.

This image of the affluent, desexualised, apolitical gay consumer was used to reposition the aims of the gay and lesbian community. Stephen Epstein (1987) writes about this shift in gay politics from a model of oppression and liberation to an ethnic identity-based politics of rights and community. Such politics, as criticised by Epstein, seeks to gain civil rights by appealing to hegemonic ideologies and ignoring structural roots of inequality and oppression: "Gay 'ethnic' politics, therefore, certainly have capacities for moving in a more radical direction. Part of what would be required, however, is a recognition that the freedom from discrimination of homosexual persons is an insufficient goal, if homosexuality as a practice retains its inferior status" (1998, 153). A model of integration positions political identity organised around sexual orientation in relation to an 'ideal.' This ideal, however, does not seek to overthrow the institutional and structural sources of oppression. Wendy Brown writes about the limits and contradictions of this identity-based politics:

... politicized identity emerges and obtains its unifying coherence through the politicization of exclusion from an ostensible universal, as a protest against exclusion, a protest premised on the fiction of an inclusive/universal community, a protest which reinstalls the humanist ideal--and a specific White, middle-class, masculinist expression of this ideal--insofar as it premises itself upon exclusion from it. (1995a, 211)

Brown asserts that configurations of identity politics in the 1990s (that many would argue still exist today) and the notions of 'freedom' or 'liberation' are unable to criticise the

inherent oppressive structures of capitalism, as it always imagines the oppressed in relation to the white, middle-class masculinist ideal. This integration or conforming to mainstream society and institutions has been criticised by many academics, largely through the notion of homonormativity. Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2003, 50). Homonormative politics is the appropriation of neoliberal ideology by the gay rights movement. For example, rather than attempting to subvert or critique the institution of marriage or the military, homonormative politics calls for the inclusion of gays and lesbians into those institutions. Such politics allowed large companies to advertise in gay publications with the knowledge that their brand would not be explicitly linked to a gay liberationist model that seeks to undermine dominant discourses surrounding capitalism and heteronormativity. Criticisms of gay advertising thus tend to assert that it is inherently and inevitably depoliticising and assimilationist in its attempt to normalise gays and lesbians (Hennessy 1994, 32; Rohlinger 2002; Sender 2004, 205). These politics allowed gay and lesbian people to be seen as consumer subjects. However, many critics would suggest that this came at the price of their visibility as social and political subjects.

Contemporary queerbaiting debates draw on notions of gay window advertising, and the construction and exploitation of gays and lesbians as consumer subjects. They also echo the debates around homonormative politics that demand visibility versus queer politics that are hesitant to accept the liberal belief that cultural visibility equates to social and political liberation. Queerbaiting both parallels and contrasts these debates. Audiences still view media visibility through the lens of marketing intentionality and exploitation, as well as the ability of representation to affect the everyday lives of queer people. However, visibility is no longer seen as simply equating to social and political liberation, as subtextual depictions of queerness and queer characters that are killed (through the “bury your gays” trope) are seen as insufficient and harmful. The emergence of the gay and lesbian market as a viable and sought-after demographic to advertisers paved the way for queerbaiting accusations of deliberate exploitation through subtextual or coded gay and lesbian imagery. Recent debates around queerbaiting note that fans believe creators are using subtext in their shows to attract gay and lesbian viewers whilst avoiding the risk of appearing ‘too gay’ (Nordin 2019; Roach 2019), the equivalent of modern gay window advertising. This focus on inauthentic motivations draws on criticisms of homonormativity

in consumer culture and, as the next section will examine, gay and lesbian material on network television in the United States.

“The Gay 90s”: The rise of gay and lesbian material on US network television

The politicisation of media images and presumption of their negative effect on marginalised people gave rise to the conditions for the emergence of queerbaiting. Debates around representational politics, for instance, became highly visible in the early 1990s during the AIDS crisis. As noted above, AIDS entered public consciousness in the early 1980s, reviving discourses of homosexuality as a disease, a pathology and a perversity. The advent of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in the mid-1990s sparked the beginning of a cultural shift from an image of people dying of AIDS to people living with HIV. As has been discussed in relation to the image of the ideal gay male consumer, after the advent of ART, a period Dion Kagan (2018) refers to as “post-crisis,”¹⁴ images of gay people (mostly men) as apolitical, asexual and monogamous emerged in American and other English-speaking popular culture. These ‘positive’ images are embedded in wider debates surrounding the politics of media visibility and representation that took place in activist and academic circles in the 1970s and 1980s. Activists called for greater visibility in media, more ‘accurate’ or ‘real’ depictions of lesbian and gay people, and criticised harmful or negative images they believed reinforced homophobia (see Dyer 1977; Russo 1981). The Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League (later renamed GLAAD)¹⁵ was formed in 1985 for these reasons. Its initial purpose was to protest against what it saw as harmful images of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis. The organisation still works today to improve representation for LGBTQ people in media. Organisations such as GLAAD and general activist and academic debates around the politics of representation seek to replace “negative” images with “positive” ones (Kagan 2018, 12). As Kagan writes, “If gay male bodies were sites of anxiety, then the asexual, domesticated gay male archetype that emerged in 1990s representations was a solution” (57). The positive images emerging in this post-crisis media landscape depicted a sympathetic, frequently comedic and palatable gay man that served as a remedy for the trope of the promiscuous, deviant and inherently

¹⁴ While the advent of ART is fundamental in the designation of the “post-crisis” era, Kagan also acknowledges the role that campaigns to increase safe-sex practices played in the cultural shift in the way people imagine HIV/AIDS.

¹⁵ The organisation changed its name to “Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation,” however, since March 2013, to include bisexual, transgender and intersex issues, “GLAAD” became the primary name for the organization rather than an acronym.

political gay man during the AIDS crisis. While these images were present in cinema, the spike in visibility was most prominent in US network television (Becker 2006).

As explained above, by the 1990s gay and lesbian people were firmly established as a lucrative segment of the market. The television industry soon took notice of the desire or willingness of advertisers to tap into this consumer group, albeit with the same reservations of not wanting to appear ‘too gay’ or align themselves with politics associated with the gay and lesbian rights movement. However, it was not until the rise of cable television in the United States that mainstream networks were forced to incorporate gay material into their regularly scheduled programming. Mass-marketing principles saw the ‘big three’ networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) dominate US viewership from the 1940s to 1960s. However, in the 1970s, cable television provided many alternatives to the three networks. Cable rejected the idea of the mass market and instead targeted niche audiences with niche interests (Becker 2006). The WB network is a clear example of this niche marketing strategy. Instead of competing with cable and the big three they opted for narrowcasting to 12 to 35-year-olds, knowing that a new network could never compete by advertising to a broad, general audience (Wee 2008, 45). The big three went from holding ninety-five percent of viewers in the 1960s to less than fifty percent in the 1990s (Wee 2008, 44). Cable’s appeal was precisely that it was not network television; HBO’s slogan at the time was “It’s not TV, it’s HBO” and Showtime’s was “No Limits.” Cable television provided audiences with what networks either would not or could not: violence, nudity and sex (Becker 2006, 96). By the 1980s, television networks were forced to abandon their outdated strategy of mass marketing and instead catch up to what advertisers were now looking for in niche marketing. When implemented ‘correctly’ (characters that are white, apolitical, asexual and monogamous) gay and lesbian material proved to be a reliable strategy for network television to compete with cable.

In remedying the ‘negative’ images of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis, the ‘positive’ images of gay and lesbian people in media greatly increased during the 1990s. Ron Becker observes that between 1994 and 1997, over forty percent of series on US network television featured at least one gay-themed episode, with popular shows like *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997) including gay jokes and references nearly every week (2006, 4). Becker (2006) identifies the competition that cable posed to network television to explain in part this sudden increase during what was coined “The Gay 90s” by *Entertainment Weekly* (Cagle 1994). As noted above, cable provided an ‘edgy’ appeal through violence and sex that network television either could not or would

not utilise. However, what networks could provide during this time of ‘positive images’ was the edgy appeal of homosexuality and the myth of the trendsetting, affluent gay consumer, whilst still maintaining their family-friendly appeal to their staple audience. During the post-crisis era, media coverage of HIV/AIDS rapidly decreased with assimilationist goals of the gay rights movement taking its place. Becker asserts that these palatable politics allowed for straight, socially liberal, urban-minded professionals (“slumpy”) to establish a “hip” identity by watching television that featured gay and lesbian characters or references (2006, 81).

But what did these positive images of homosexuality look like during the Gay 90s? How did they present an apolitical, asexual image of gays and lesbians to give an edgy appeal for network television? Bonnie Dow (2001) highlights various methods utilised in the ABC sitcom *Ellen* (1994–1998). She argues that *Ellen* and a number of other shows rarely presented gay or lesbian people as integral elements of the narrative, always serving as either one-time appearances or supporting roles. If they were included, their narratives largely centred on ways in which their homosexuality affected the straight characters. The challenges that gay and lesbian characters faced were always personal, never political. Such a distinction allowed for storylines to be separated from any wider political context. This separation was also exacerbated by gay and lesbian characters rarely shown as having other gay friends or being a part of the gay community. Most importantly, they rarely, if ever, experienced sexual desire, let alone actually engaging in kissing or sex.

This desexualisation has been widely criticised by many scholars of this era of programming (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Becker 2006). A 1994 feature in *The Advocate* asked, “Why can’t this man get laid?” referring to the suspicious celibacy of the character Matt from popular Fox teenage drama, *Melrose Place* (1992–1999). In response, creator and producer Darren Star stated that “the nature of television and advertising is such that we cannot permit Matt to have real physical relationships onscreen like the other characters” (quoted in Bull 1994, 44). However, the most notable example that contributed to the trend of desexualising gay and lesbian characters was the ABC drama *Thirtysomething* (1987–1991). The episode “Strangers” aired in 1989 featured two shirtless gay men in bed having a conversation, implying that they had previously had sex, cautiously not touching throughout the entire scene. After its airing, the network received hundreds of complaints and lost over a million dollars in advertising, prompting them to remove the episode from the re-run schedule that summer (Fejes and Petrich 1993, 413). “Strangers” became a warning throughout the industry. It seemingly presented an example

of how *not* to represent gay characters, partly contributing to the desexualisation of gay and lesbian characters throughout network television and other media.

There was a trend of framing the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters in television in terms of their effect on the heterosexual protagonists, with same-sex sexual activity often being played for laughs. *Ellen*, however, does provide a historic example of a lesbian protagonist that drives the story. Her character famously came out in “The Puppy Episode” in 1997 shortly after DeGeneres herself came out publicly. The show received a huge increase in ratings as well as an Emmy award for best comedy writing. However, despite efforts to render her character palatable to mainstream audiences following her coming out, ABC cancelled *Ellen* after the next season saw a significant decline in ratings. The explanation often cited was that the show became “too gay” (Loby 2005). *Ellen*’s coming out and subsequent cancellation is argued by many to have allowed for the success of NBC’s *Will and Grace* (1998–2006) (Hall 1998; Milvy 1998; Mink 1998). However, both shows, despite being seen as “trailblazers” and winning many GLAAD awards, were subject to intense criticism by scholars who were wary of the ‘positive images’ of the openly gay characters of *Ellen*, and *Will and Jack* (Dow 2001; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002). By focusing on inter-personal relationships with no consideration of politics, these shows potentially encourage the false belief that cultural visibility equates to political liberation and social acceptance (Crimp 1993; Martin 1993; Dow 2001; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002). Moreover, as Kohnen (2015) points out, the proliferation of these images during the 1990s provided a more tangible and undeniable tactic of queer representation. What this ultimately does, Kohnen argues, is limit how queerness can manifest itself. There became a clear division between explicit and subtextual representations of queerness. With this division came restrictions such as homonormativity, desexualisation and whiteness. The call for positive images of gay and lesbian people is fraught with difficulty. These images can reinforce homonormative ideals and, as Ron Becker’s archive of gay and lesbian characters in 1990s network television demonstrates, be overwhelmingly white (2006, 180). These positive images can set up unrealistic, irrelevant or even dangerous expectations for queer people. The call also removes the nuances of many of these representations by merely asking if they are good or bad, accurate or stereotypical. The AIDS crisis sparked a highly visible politicisation of media depictions of queer people that paved the way for the emergence of contemporary queerbaiting debates.

As we will see in the following chapters, fans assert that queerbaiting is bad representation that causes harm to viewers. This, in turn, exacerbates their frustration,

anger and hurt. These feelings are directed at the creators for their apparent hesitation to explicitly represent queer characters and their purported, deliberate exploitation of the desire of audiences for positive representation. Queerbaiting critique is influenced by the positive imaging debates of the 1990s whereby accusations and criticisms are founded on the idea that representation of minority groups affects their lives in profound ways. During the era of early slash fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, however, fans engaged in playful acts of queering texts. Yet, in the political climate of queerbaiting, actualising queerness is inextricably tied to positive imaging debates and the deep, emotional investments fans have in the politics of representation. What has facilitated this shift?

Social media and a new era of queer fandom

One of the more obvious changes in media culture since the age of slash fiction and the “Gay 90s” has been the emergence of the internet. Although fans have been engaging in transformative creative practices without digital technology for decades, the emergence of the internet has fostered new forms of community in which fans can share their works and experience media together on a scale not possible through conventions and fanzines alone. More significant to the emergence of queerbaiting, however, is that this sense of community has allowed fans to unite in their queer readings of media and their criticisms of what they perceive to be representational harm. They have the ability to directly speak to creators and mobilise around their grievances.

Media texts accused of queerbaiting often belong to a science-fiction or cult television genre where audiences are encouraged to engage with the texts and its creators to an extent not seen in other genres (see Booth 2010; Hofmann 2018). Digital media has helped facilitate this engagement and has allowed fans to find like-minded others to encourage and share ‘subcultural’ desires and activities (Kohnen 2008). The internet has fundamentally altered the way media is produced. As J.J. Abrams, the creator of television shows *Alias* (2001–2006) and *Lost* (2004–2010), explains: “If the Internet is your audience, TV is quite like a play ... Movies are a done deal—there’s no give and take—but in a play, you listen to the applause, the missing laughs, the boos. It’s the same with the Internet. If you ignore that sort of response, you probably shouldn’t be working in TV right now” (quoted in Andrejevic 2008, 25). Audience engagement on social media has become a primary means of assessing a show’s reception and success. Many shows include Twitter hashtags on screen, inviting fans to simultaneously join an online conversation whilst

watching, serving as one method of digitally tracing the quality of audience engagement rather than just the quantity of viewers (Jenkins 2006, 63). The creators of the cult science-fiction hit series, *The X-Files* (1993–2002), capitalised on the engagement of its audience by frequenting online fan forums that discussed the series, often recognising prominent fans by naming characters after them and allowing some opinions of fans to shape storylines (Jones 2013, 95). Before social media, fan communities operated with the knowledge that a distinct division existed between them and the creators of media. This resulted in them producing fan art and fanfiction shrouded in feelings of secrecy (Bacon-Smith 1992). The distance between the fans and the actual creators of media was foundational to their community and practice. The purported collapse of this distance that social media has created can be seen as one of the starkest contrasts of contemporary slash fandom to the women in Bacon-Smith’s ethnographic study. Slash fiction was initially created by fans with the knowledge that only other like-minded fans would see it. Social media has not only allowed people outside of fandom to see slash fiction, but now the creators of media, including the actors who portray slash characters, are able to see it. This imaginative barrier between fans and creators—“the fourth wall”—has eroded, allowing producers of media access to fan spaces, and fans unprecedented access to producers of media (Thomas 2017).

What does this new dynamic between audiences and producers do for subcultural queer readings of media? *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) is a striking example of how the relationship between creators of media and queer desires of audiences were altered by the internet. The character Xena was first introduced in the fantasy adventure television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and received her own spin-off later that year. *X: WP* follows Xena (Lucy Lawless) who travels Ancient Greece with her sidekick Gabrielle (Renee O’Connor) battling evils and saving people. The series aired during the emergence of the internet, allowing fans to communicate with one another. Subsequently, *Xena* spawned a large following with a sizeable lesbian fan base (Maris 2016). Now operating in an era of internet fan communities, the creative team behind *Xena* did not shy away from their gay fans. Instead, they leaned into their cult lesbian following and actively wrote more explicit ‘gay subtext’ into the show (Gwenllian-Jones 2000; Hellford 2000; Hamming 2001; Silverman 2001). Maris (2016) paints a picture of audiences playing a more active role in the production of queer narratives or more explicit lesbian subtext. “Fan impact led to dramatic changes in *X: WP*’s on-air content,” she writes, “resulting in a queer mainstream text that played with gender and sexuality and showcased

women free of distinct gender roles or sexual orientations” (2016, 124). Maris contends that the writers and producers did not attempt to diminish the potential for queer readings of Xena/Gabrielle like contemporary queerbaiting texts are accused of doing (Fathallah 2015). Rather, “the changes in the text were largely seen to ‘play’ *with* lesbian fans without exploiting lesbian sexuality for male pleasure or studio profits” (2016, 132, original emphasis). Writing while *Xena* was airing, Gwenllian-Jones echoes Maris’ claim that lesbian fans exercised power over the production of queerness within the text. In her analysis of Lucy Lawless’ star image, she writes, “By buying into and then seizing control of Xena’s star text, fans execute a coup without hostility that marks a profound shift in the balance of creative power between television industry and television audiences” (Gwenllian-Jones 2000, 20). These accounts of queer readings of *Xena* and the relationship between these subcultural or transgressive fan behaviours and the official, authorised producers of media present a stark contrast to earlier days of slash fandom explored in this chapter. Maris and Gwenllian-Jones depict audiences as empowered and invigorated by the willingness of producers to ‘play’ with queer readings, rather than deny their legitimacy or dismiss them as wishful thinking or deviant.

However, not all accounts of *Xena*’s queer fandom have been as positive or optimistic. Some argue that this shift in the relationship between producers and queer readings is exploitative, in line with contemporary queerbaiting critique. For example, Silverman, also writing while *Xena* was airing, presents a more critical view of the intent of producers:

I maintain that the not-so-ambiguous lesbian subtext that weaves in and out of every episode is a consciously orchestrated and heavily cultivated phenomenon. Whether they understood the exact nature of Xena’s appeal or not, the producers realized at some point that the lesbian thing was indispensable to the show’s broad success, and they found ways to work it without taking any real risks. (2001, 33)

Silverman criticises the decision of producers to keep the lesbian subtext as just subtext, rather than bringing it to the explicit, denotative textual level. She argues that it signifies their hesitation to represent lesbian characters. For Silverman, this subtextual content highlights the exploitation of lesbian audiences by producers, echoing many debates around the potential ‘empowering’ representation in consumer culture and in contemporary debates around queer visibility versus queerbaiting. She asserts that the lesbian subtext in *Xena* is an opportunistic and ruthless ploy by the producers to attract lesbian viewers without making the show appear too gay. Hamming (2001), on the other hand, claims that

it is precisely the subtext that is part of the pleasure for lesbian viewers, not necessarily the promise or hope for explicit lesbian content. She argues that “not knowing for sure” whether Xena and Gabrielle are lovers is where many lesbian fans derive their pleasure and what makes subtext so profitable for creators (2001, 21). Conversely, Silverman asserts that this hesitation to bring the subtext into explicit text is essentially homophobic in its characterisation of images of lesbians on screen as inappropriate to younger viewers. She argues her point by referring to a quote from the actress who plays Gabrielle: “we have to keep this a family show” (O’Connor quoted in Silverman 2001, 134). Hellford shares a similar view to Silverman and rejects the celebration of subtext as positive or liberating representation. “As long as we keep tuning in,” she writes, “the producers make money. And if they make money without viewers having to challenge homophobia, neither a LGBT rights nor a feminist agenda will be served. Therefore, such analysis reveals that polysemy is a highly problematic basis for political struggle” (2000, 131). Hellford argues that by maintaining the lesbian story in the realms of the subtextual—the always closetable and deniable—heterosexual audiences will be able to consume *Xena* whilst maintaining their potentially homophobic ideologies. She argues that subtextual queerness allows heterosexual media to capitalise on it for profit (and pleasure) without admitting to it.

Although Silverman, Hamming and Hellford were writing almost a decade before “queerbaiting” became a widely used term by online fan communities, they echo many of the sentiments used by contemporary fans. They argue that queer subtext is an intentional ploy by producers to attract queer viewers without alienating general audiences. They also reject the celebration of subtext, arguing that it is merely a marketing tactic that does nothing to challenge homophobia. The coining of the term “queerbaiting” is itself a form of fan activism that is both an accusation and a criticism in the very act of defining it (Nordin 2015, 64). Although similar ideas to queerbaiting were present years before the eventual creation of the term, it demonstrates the emergence of a new era of politics surrounding queer visibility and fan activism. This activism is centred around queer representation. The existence of the term “queerbaiting” allows fans a point of reference for their desires, affective responses and their political (and personal) investments in media. *Xena* presents an early example of producers explicitly engaging with queer readings and desires of fans during a liminal stage of the emergence of the internet. Thus the line between creator and audience became increasingly blurred. *Xena*’s lesbian subtext sparked debates that both celebrated the subtext as pleasurable, as well as criticisms of exploitation and

harmful representation. Queer fans were able to create a community and also be seen by the creators of media whose stories they were supposedly manipulating for queer ends.

Producers are able to capitalise on this fan devotion and offer more ‘legitimate’ possibilities of feeling a sense of ownership over texts for fans. For instance, encouraging fans to buy official merchandise and attend authorised conventions could foster a sense of ownership without contradicting the official textual meaning. The demarcation of these forms of fan engagement as “affirmational” (affirming the official meaning of creators) and “transformational” (transforming the official meaning of creators into that of fans) was originally outlined in a blog by “obsessions_inc” and has since been taken up by scholars of fandom studies (Busse 2013; Ford 2014; Tosenberger 2014; Scott 2015). Fan practices are often driven into more profitable and affirmational ways of reinforcing the authority of creators over textual meaning. With this attempt to control fan behaviour, fans sometimes feel shamed for their queer readings within discourses of queerbaiting. The “denial and mockery” (Fathallah 2015, 491) of the impassioned readings of queerness by fans are seen as tactics of shaming. This dynamic, however, is often used by fans in their accusations and criticisms of queerbaiting. It allows them to mobilise through their shared rage and hurt. Their identities are seemingly formed largely through this mobilisation, through a history of trauma and injury.¹⁶

Social media has enabled audiences to unite in their frustration and anger and helped create a highly visible and traceable critique of heteronormativity in media. For example, after the success of the Disney film *Frozen* (Buck and Lee 2013), audiences called for the character Elsa to be “given a girlfriend” for the film’s sequel. The hashtag #GiveElsaAGirlfriend trended on Twitter in 2016. Critics largely used this hashtag to point to the lack of lesbian and gay characters in Disney films. One user wrote: “#GiveElsaAGirlfriend because LGBT kids deserve to know that there is nothing wrong with them” (quoted in Dockterman 2016). Many tweets in the hashtag were also distanced from attempts to find evidence of Elsa’s lesbianism in *Frozen* (although such claims were used) and instead focused on the importance of lesbian and gay representation, particularly for young children who are Disney’s target demographic.¹⁷ The visibility of this swift and vocal response speaks to the contemporary climate of representation and media-saturated culture that allows audiences to mobilise in their criticisms of media producers. Social media has facilitated the politicisation of representation into mainstream audience

¹⁶ This identity formation will be explored further in chapter two of this thesis.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the shift within queerbaiting debates from fans identifying “evidence” of queerness in texts to a mobilisation of affect, see McDermott (2019).

reception of media texts. Such politicisation is most visible in the emergence of the phenomenon of queerbaiting.

Social media's diminishing of the "fourth wall" has somewhat blurred the positions of creator and audience (Thomas 2017). Producers continually engage with fans, whether it is encouraging them to tweet about the show with hashtags on screen, to buy tickets to conventions, or to speak with them directly on social media. Gray argues that this engagement is a deliberate act of confusing the role of creator and consumer which inevitably yields part of the power and authority of the creators onto that of fans (2010, 112). By inviting fans to communicate with them, producers have encouraged profitable engagement, both affirmational and critical (Ballinger 2014). Social media has allowed fans to present themselves as visibly empowered by directly criticising the creators of media, as well as by sharing videos of direct questions in person at conventions. The increased visibility and the weakening of the boundary between producer and audience has created an image of fans as empowered, to be more and more active in their production and defence of queer stories. They are no longer hiding their desires. They are making their desires and demands clear to the creators and utilising the term "queerbaiting" to directly accuse them of engaging in deliberate exploitation.

Conclusion

Slash fiction, the construction of the gay market, the rise of gay material on television, and the emergence of social media and online fandom all highlight the various political, economic and cultural shifts that conditioned the emergence of queerbaiting as a named phenomenon. Queerbaiting is thus embedded in the politicisation of queer images. As will be explored throughout this thesis, contemporary fans navigate representational politics through identities and affect, drawing on the tradition of mainstream gay rights movements that seek to unite queer people through an imagined collective.

Alongside positive imaging and increasing politicisation of queer representation, practices of reading and seeing queerly have shifted. Gay window advertising and early slash fandom highlight how the ability of audiences to read and see queerness is entangled with notions of agency and exploitation. How are contemporary audiences seeing and reading queerly? How have these shifts in representational politics affected conceptualisations of queerness by fans? The next chapter presents qualitative interviews

with fans involved in queerbaiting debates in order to examine how they are thinking about, reading and seeing queerness within texts.

Chapter 2: The ‘Queer’ in Queerbaiting

Queerbaiting has generated a significant conversation amongst fan communities about the importance of queer representation and visibility in media. This raises questions about how precisely fans are reading this queerness and what reading practices are being utilised. To read or understand a character or text as queer is to make a claim to “know” or “assume” what queerness looks like. But how do queerbaiting texts represent queerness? Some recent scholarly enquiries into queerbaiting conduct textual analyses of the accused series in order to “prove” the existence of deliberate exploitation (Collier 2015; Sheehan 2015). However, there has yet to be any investigation of the phenomenon that speaks to fans directly. It is their interpretations of queerness, their relationships with texts, the performativity of their negative affect, and their mobilisation around representational politics that construct the phenomenon of queerbaiting as it is (re)produced in online fan cultures. Speaking to fans directly is therefore pivotal for an understanding of how queerness is being conceptualised in contemporary politics and media culture. How does queerness appear for these fans and how are they mobilising and understanding it in their critiques of queerbaiting?

Drawing on twenty-four qualitative interviews, this chapter examines how contemporary fans understand queerbaiting, and how and to what ends they are reading queerness in media texts. I argue that one of the central projects for fans in their critiques of queerbaiting is to decentre heterosexuality in dominant interpretations of popular media texts. This seems at first glance to be in line with earlier queer poststructuralists and queer theorists that locate and celebrate queerness as always already present in all media texts, thereby decentring authorial intent from any legitimising effect. However, in stark contrast to earlier traditions of queer theory, the figure of the author is placed at the centre of control over meaning-making within fan critiques. What this reveals, I suggest, is a significant shift in queer political practice within contemporary fandom. The figure of the author serves to instate a site of blame for the perceived harms of queerbaiting. It is through blame that affective identity politics are utilised to position fans as vulnerable (queer) and creators as powerful (straight/cis). Fans also utilise identity politics to call for diversity and inclusion in queer media, whilst distancing themselves from the biologically essentialist notion of sexuality as individual ontology prevalent in much contemporary gay rights discourse. As we will see, this is just one of many tensions present within queerbaiting and an example of a powerful refiguring of identity politics in current queer political fandom.

Fans navigate the project of making queerness inclusive, diverse and non-definitive, whilst attempting to locate queer textual meaning as fixed. This is driven by a

desire to utilise a visible power dynamic between themselves, as victims of exploitation, and authorised media creators with full control over the production of textual meaning. I argue that this presents a tension in queerbaiting between the meaning and function of queerness in textual readings by fans and their political investments in media visibility. What flows from this, I argue, is a new mode of queer political subjectivity for fans that sees media representation and authorial intent crucial to the social and cultural liberation of queer people. This subjectivity is embodied through the mobilisation of affect, the evacuation of agency, and the distancing of pleasure, playfulness, or empowerment so evident in earlier forms of queer fandom.

Queer theory

To examine the conceptualisation and mobilisation of queerness in current queerbaiting debates, it is worth examining the history of “queer,” particularly as it arose as a theory and object of academic enquiry. Queer theory emerged from the fields of women’s studies and gay and lesbian studies in the 1990s. One of its primary purposes is to examine how norms and meanings in relation to bodies, genders, and desires are discursively produced (Butler 1990, 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993). Queer theory and queer politics have sought to reclaim the word “queer” from its historically pejorative and negative implications. Such reclamation is enacted in an attempt to challenge the assumption that those who do not meet normative standards of bodies, genders, and desires are morally, socially and culturally inferior. In this way, queer emerged as an oppositional critique to mainstream gay and lesbian identity politics that aimed to ingratiate (assimilate) itself into white, heteronormative and classist ideologies and institutions. As a theoretical project, it was founded upon a profound distrust of identities. Such universalising categories have been viewed as normative and exclusionary. Queer theory posits that identities are not socially embodied facts that reveal an inner essence or shared traits and experiences that transcend history and culture. Rather, identities are understood to be discursively constructed through specific historical and cultural discourses (Scott 1995; Alcoff and Mohanty 2006). Wendy Brown (1995b) critiques politicised identities as steeped in classism and therefore unable to effectively dismantle capitalism. She argues that they hold with them their history of injury, pain and exclusion. In their attempt to point to evidence of their oppression and victimhood, identities reinforce this injury by reinscribing a white, middle-class, masculinist ideal. For political movements that stake their claim on the basis of identity,

this ideal symbolises emancipation, upward mobility, vocational opportunity, and freedom and protection. For Brown, these capitalist ideologies of success as liberation reinstate the attachment of politicised identities to practices of exclusion. Judith Butler also critiques identity-based politics as ineffective. She argues that the subject through and upon which a political movement exists inevitably reinstates the exclusion that prompted the movement: “power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again” (1992, 13). Queerness in this way can be seen as an oppositional stance against formations of identities as it relates to ideals and norms.

Hames-Garcia calls for an understanding of identities through a constructivist framework that accounts for multiple and connected oppressions. He writes that “given the intermeshing of oppressions, when one considers gay and lesbian identities, one should ask how they are constructed not only in resistance to and complicity with homophobia, but also in resistance to and complicity with racism, colonialism, and capitalism” (2006, 78). Similarly, a materialist feminist approach to identities rejects essentialist notions of sex that suggest the essence or truth of a woman ‘before’ oppression (Wittig 1981). This approach looks at gender as categories and political classes that cannot be separated from politics or power (see de Lauretis 1993). Queer theory aims to expose and dismantle the power structures underpinning identities (Scott 1995). However, Butler notes that while queerness has been politically useful as a “discursive rallying point,” the broadness of the term can create tensions between the critical performance of queerness and the lived experience and material realities of sexual minorities (1993, 230; also see Duggan 1994). The use of “queer” as an umbrella term for same-sex attracted, and trans and gender-diverse people has also furthered this problem of exclusion through the attachment and investment in identity. Identity politics, in short, privileges those for whom the identity is a primary marker. It results in much of the gay rights movement centring of white, middle-class men as representative of the community at the expense of race, gender and class.

Queer theory, in drawing on constructionist lesbian and gay history,¹⁸ utilises a poststructuralist mode of de-essentialising ‘truth’ to highlight the recent, Western construction of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. It suggests that sexuality is socially constructed and not a fixed, immutable marker upon individual bodies and personalities. In such de-essentialisation of sexuality as individual ontology, and problematisation of the

¹⁸ For a discussion of the “strained relations” between queer theory and gay and lesbian constructionist history, see Duggan (1995) and Angelides (2001, 8).

fixed nature and political saliency of identities, queer theory belongs to the larger project of poststructuralist questioning of the nature and authority of truth. As noted in the introductory chapter of this thesis, poststructuralist thought has influenced many queer theoretical approaches to literature and cinema that decentres authorial intent in the legitimisation of (singular) meaning. Readings ‘against the grain’ of the intended or dominant meaning for queer ends became a particularly popular scholarly tradition in the 1980s–1990s (Hanson 1999; Doty 1993, 2000; Dyer 1993). Alexander Doty’s foundational work on queer readings of popular cinematic texts attempts to decentre straightness from popular culture by highlighting the queerness that is present in all texts:

since I don’t see queer readings as any less there, or any less ‘real’ than straight readings of classical texts, I don’t feel that what I am doing is colluding with dominant representational or interpretive regimes. However, I always have to be careful to make the point that my work doesn’t (or tries not to) discuss queerness and mainstream texts in terms of connotation, subtexting, etcetera, because, politically, I don’t buy these concepts anymore. (Doty quoted in Farmer 1998, 6)

Doty is careful to clarify that these readings are not simply ‘alternative,’ ‘wilful’ or ‘wishful misreadings.’ Rather, he suggests, these readings are the articulation of queerness that is always already present in all texts. He does not limit these readings, however, to simply explicit sexual or romantic interactions between two men or women. Queerness, for Doty, refers to a variety of feelings, subjectivities and identifications with characters and narratives that speak to queerness in some way. This reflects a broader tradition in queer theory that understands queerness itself as unable to be definitively defined. In such tradition, any attempt to define what “queer” means becomes immediately problematic, if not paradoxical (Angelides 1994, 66). Queerness defies and disturbs boundaries and categorisations. Exceeding any unifying definition, for many theorists, the term “queer” thus can never constitute an identity, only ever disrupt one. In light of such a history of the impossibility of a definitive queerness, how are contemporary fans conceptualising and utilising queerness in their readings of media texts, and in their accusations and criticisms of queerbaiting?

“Queer”-baiting: Diversity and inclusion in media

As noted above, what exactly “queer” means or encompasses has been debated amongst queer theorists and poststructuralists since the emergence of the field. Queerness, as

defying definition, is fundamental to many queer theorists' understanding of its disturbance of the impulse to categorise bodies, gender, sexuality, and desire. In my interviews, however, the queerness in queerbaiting texts for fans seems to be solely represented by same-sex attraction largely embodied through romantic or sexual interactions between two men or two women, often with a sexual identity illustrative of this inner orientation. Some fans did, however, acknowledge the history of the term "queer" as a slur. For instance, Kara, a 20-year-old *Supergirl* fan, said "I understand why older generations of the LGBTQ community may not like using the term, but I have also learned that it is a slur that has been reclaimed by many younger generations." Kara stated that she first saw "queer" being used in a "positive, reclaimed way" on Tumblr and then later learned about its history in her LGBTQ course at college. This acknowledgement of the conceptual motility of the term "queer" was present in other discussions with fans as well. Ari, a non-binary, bisexual fan stated, "I know queer literally means 'weird' but I'm all for us LGBT+ people reclaiming the word." Whilst acknowledging the historical use of the term as a slur, these fans use it as a way to encompass the LGBTQ+ community, locating queerness as an identifiable marker of gender or sexual identity. However, as heterosexual fan Phoenix demonstrated, perhaps the offensive nature of "queer" is not as historical as some fans have suggested in their allusions to reclamation: "I'm always wary when I use the word 'queer' because, not being a part of the LGBT+ community myself, I'm always scared to offend someone. I use queer as a way to describe any member of the LGBT+ community, simply for a matter of brevity." Despite the potential offence, Phoenix, along with many other fans, use the term "queer" as a way to encapsulate all members of the LGBTQ+ community. This focus on identity is drawn from a desire or compulsion for liberal inclusion and diversity within this community. Anna, a 21-year-old lesbian says, "I think that as we're coming to the point of realising that sexuality and gender identity are a lot more diverse than was believed in the past, queer has offered not only a chance to reclaim what was once a slur against us, but also to actively be more inclusive of all identities." Like many fans, Anna's only experience with the word queer was a derogatory use before learning about positive, reclaimed conceptions on Tumblr and Twitter. However, rather than an oppositional critique of normative identities and mainstream identity politics in line with queer theorists, "queer" for these fans is utilised as an umbrella term to ensure inclusive language was used in their calls for diversity in media:

["Queer" is an] umbrella term for GLBT. I've seen a lot of other initials added to 'GLBT' – I don't know them, but not because I want to exclude them from the umbrella term. (Sam, 31, straight)

I generally use it as a blanket term for “non-straight people”. Using the LGBTQIAA alphabet soup label seems clunky and also still leaves people out. (Cameron, 34, bisexual)

Laura, a 24-year-old lesbian and Tumblr user did mention that her use of the term queer in this collective way was not just a means of inclusivity, but a way for her to feel a sense of belonging and community. She stated that although she is a lesbian, she has friends who are bisexual, gay men, transgender, but that “we’re all a bunch of queers.” For Laura, her use of the term queer is not just to avoid excluding people from the LGBTQ community, but to make herself feel included amongst her peers, to feel a sense of belonging despite their seemingly different genders or sexualities.

The desire to encompass all members of the community highlights an impulse for authenticity and identity coherency. Rob Cover suggests that the proliferation of identity categories on social media presents a new taxonomy of gender and sexuality whereby labels are sought to provide queers with coherency, authenticity and intelligibility (2019a, b). I observe a similar investment within queerbaiting. Queerness becomes intelligible for fans by prescribing a name to it. A contemporary subjectivity of fans, I argue, is partly constituted by the desire to capture diversity and to provide a neat, coherent name for their experience. In this way, capturing diversity enables queerness to become ‘authentic,’ highlighting what Cover refers to as the “cult of authenticity” (2019b, 287). The rhetoric of diversity, especially within representational politics, compels subjects to articulate their sexual subjectivity through an identity.

Within this contemporary, queer political fandom, the term “queer” is used in line with the practice of encouraging diversity and inclusion in media. Diversity and inclusion seem to be the actions to which identity politics is the theory. Scholarship on media representation and its relationship to audiences aims to analyse how oppressed groups are depicted in media to examine the dominant cultural ideologies being (re)produced. The impulse behind these studies was the belief that the ways in which oppressed people are represented in media directly affects how they are treated. However, Richard Dyer argues that focusing media analysis on the Other serves to reinforce this sense of Otherness, oddness and other ways in which they depart from the norm (1993, 141). The norm becomes invisible as an identity in an attempt to analyse its representation. For instance, any film containing predominantly black people becomes a *black* film, a film with predominantly gay characters becomes a *gay* film; however, when analysing whiteness or heterosexuality, the images inherently become something more specific: “*Brief Encounter*

is not about white people, it is about English middle-class people; *The Godfather* is not about white people, it is about Italian-American people; but *The Color Purple* is about black people, before it is about poor, southern US people” (Dyer 1993, 143). The impetus in the study of the Other is often the desire for greater visibility of marginalised communities in mainstream media. The liberal belief that cultural visibility equates to political, social, or economic liberation or legitimacy underpins many contemporary representational politics. Calls for inclusion and diversity in media follow the tradition of identity politics that sees ‘diversity’ as a natural state of human existence, rather than, as Joan Scott writes, “the effect of an enunciation of difference [of identities] that constitutes hierarchies and asymmetries of power” (1995, 5). Just as there existed a conflict between queer politics in theory and in practice (see Duggan 1994), there is a tension between identity politics and what the meaning and significance of “queer” is in relation to visibility and media representation. When I asked why she thinks queer representation in media has progressed, 38-year-old lesbian and *The Good Wife* (2009–2016) fan, DW, stated, “I think we can thank the movement Harvey Milk started in the [19]70’s. ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are.’ The queer community has gotten outter, louder and become unapologetic. We demand to be seen.” Positive representation for DW is the result of increased visibility of queer people; however, this visibility is inevitably tied to identities. For representation or visibility to be significant, one must ‘come out’ as something that is explicitly embodied through an identity.

It is clear that the term “queer” has shifted meaning in contemporary queer political fandom from early queer anti-identity theorists. In her critique of identity politics, Lisa Duggan writes, “We need strategies that do not require us to specify who is and is not a ‘member’ of our group” (1994, 9). The desire for these strategies is evidently not shared by the fans that participated in my study. For them, queer is a method by which these identities are brought together under the banner of diversity and inclusion, as well as illustrating the desire for identity coherence, authenticity and intelligibility. Yet, a tension emerges when this is applied to media representation where a character must perform an authentic queerness tied to an identity. In order to meet demands for diverse queer representation, a character must perform the embodiment of same-sex desire through romantic or sexual affection, which, for some fans, requires a coming-out as an explicit identity. But how then, according to fans, does this understanding of sexuality function in queerbaiting texts in which characters are introduced as heterosexual and yet experience same-sex desire?

Sexuality

The understanding for fans of “queer” as an inclusive term for the LGBTQ community fits comfortably, I suggest, with the idea of sexuality as an intrinsic aspect of a person’s psyche. An insistence upon an intrinsic sexual orientation has been the foundation for many identity-based political aims of the modern gay rights movement. One fan writes “I believe sexuality is something we’re born with and that we can discover at any point in our lives. Personally, I ‘discovered’ I was straight. I didn’t assume I was just because it is the norm, I went through a journey of self-discovery when I was younger and realised I was straight” (Phoenix). However, while many of the fans believed that people may have predispositions towards certain sexual orientations present from birth, there was also an element of ‘fluidity’ in their understanding of sexuality. Whilst Phoenix was only one of three heterosexual participants, it is interesting that she held the strongest beliefs about sexuality being biologically pre-determined. Many of the other participants who did not identify as heterosexual presented more nuanced beliefs:

Due to society assuming everyone is heterosexual, most people in the LGBTQ community have to “discover” their sexuality despite being born that way. I believe some people's sexuality is more fluid than others, just like some people's gender is more fluid than others. (Kara, 20, questioning)

I think we may be born with some type of predisposition, but I believe a lot of it is just socially imposed. (Liana, 26, bisexual)

I think we're probably born with a preference. However, I also think that preference can change. (Margot, 22, bisexual)

I think sexuality is fluid as heckie, and just like gender is a more social construct, we’ve tried to push into a binary instead of just accepting that people are just, like, people. But I think people are born (or discover as they hit puberty) with their attraction to people of whatever gender, but I also think that can change over time! (Laura, 24, lesbian)

There are societal structures put in place that make it harder for queer people to realise their queerness. But on the other hand, I think that for some people their sexuality does change. For example, I’m bi and have always felt bi, but the amount of attraction I feel to different genders has changed over time. I used to be equally attracted to men and women, but now I’m mostly attracted to women, with the ability to be attracted to people of other genders. (Lena, 26, bisexual)

These responses surprised me initially. Many of the fans subscribed to common beliefs about queerness, diversity and identity politics. Why is it that despite acknowledging some

level of predisposition many fans suggested that sexuality is not necessarily fixed and unchangeable? Their conceptions of sexuality seem to present a shift in identity politics: an amalgamation of earlier and contemporary versions of gay and lesbian identity politics. They describe a fluidity that allows for distance from biological essentialism whilst simultaneously retaining a deep investment in identity categories as a basis for politics. How are they reconciling their understanding of “queer” as inevitably tied to identity—so separated from earlier queer theorists—with the idea of sexuality as *not* tied to an orientation that reflects an intrinsic, immutable aspect of a person?

Many characters at the centre of queerbaiting debates, introduced as straight, display sexual/romantic attraction for other genders with no explicit declaration of attraction to the same gender. The idea of sexuality being an immutable and fixed characteristic present from birth would seem to suggest that these characters therefore could not suddenly experience attraction to people of the same gender. Thus, queerbaiting accusations rely on the idea of sexuality as mutable, murky, and not necessarily a fixed characteristic. This also fits in with the impulse for coherency and authenticity of queerness (Cover 2019a, b). Sexuality subject to change allows fans (and characters) to find a category that best describes them. Such description speaks to their desire to find intelligibility. Sexuality may change, but through this change supposedly comes greater clarity, a sharper sense of self, and a more authentic identity that ‘actually’ captures their desires and experiences.

Many fans argue, moreover, that this belief of people being ‘born this way’¹⁹ is often utilised by critics who argue that fans are reading ‘too much into it’ and are ‘wishfully misreading’ the text in their ‘inauthentic’ demands for diversity. Authenticity in this sense refers to the primary narrative of a media text. Critics of these fans will argue that calls for diversity and inclusion in media texts via accusations of queerbaiting are ‘forced’ and do not fit into the authentic trajectory of the narrative. The belief in sexuality as a biological, immutable aspect of a person would involve straight characters that are introduced as straight from the beginning of a story and not changing their sexuality unless they were initially deceiving audiences and later come out as bisexual or gay. This does not fit into many conceptions of sexuality for fans who seem to problematise the strict homosexual/heterosexual binary in their accusations and criticisms of queerbaiting.

¹⁹ *Born This Way* is a song released by Lady Gaga in 2011 that aimed to empower the LGBTQ community through the idea of an unchanging, fixed sexual/gender identity that has existed since birth. The song reached number one on music charts in over twenty-five countries.

Despite this potential ‘queering’ of sexuality, many fans still relied on notions of identity as a basis for their criticisms of queerbaiting and calls for inclusion in media. Some participants I interviewed spoke about their frustration at what they see as the co-option of identity politics and the rhetoric of diversity in queer political fandom without the ‘sincere’ intention of inclusion in media. Although the fans I interviewed did not demonstrate these beliefs or tendencies, some of them spoke of other fans they have encountered in queerbaiting debates online who do. My participants criticised those fans who draw on identity politics as a way to support their beliefs that the characters they are seeing are queer despite their introduction as heterosexual. These arguments will generally identify the character as bisexual in order to justify their attraction to other genders as well as the same gender. This argument becomes problematic for some fans when they are criticised for their desire to have certain (male) characters become explicitly gay or bisexual despite their apparent introduction in the narrative as heterosexual.

There is an attitude that male characters cannot fall in love or have sex with the same sex if this wasn’t a desire established VERY clearly since the beginning. A girl can suddenly decide she would like to kiss a girl, even if her orientation was never presented as anything other than straight [...but] males? They are suddenly GAY, and this requires GAY presentation and very outspoken GAY desires. (Patrizia, bisexual, *Supernatural* fanfiction writer)

Patrizia is criticising the need for same-sex desire or sexual encounters to be firmly established through essentialist notions of identity politics. These notions ground sexuality as the unchanging inner essence of a person through which a label is identified outside of culture or history. There is a need in some fans to reinforce the significance and queer capital of characters through the use of identity categories in which same-sex sexual encounters or desire (largely between men) must be firmly established and legitimised through the establishment of a gay or bisexual identity. Another bisexual participant, Cameron, expressed frustration at this practice. He critiques the use of identities to ‘prove’ queerness in an attempt by fans to see their favourite character pairing become explicitly romantic/sexual, rather than for the purposes of representation: “When I thought [*Supernatural*] fans (and maybe even some of the writers) supported bisexuality, I was really excited. When I realised it was the exact opposite, it hurt. Bisexuality is very underrepresented in media, especially in any sort of actual, authentic way. To use it as a cover for shipping wars really sucks” (Cameron, 34). Cameron is referring to fans of Destiel, the portmanteau of the characters Dean and Castiel, that consistently refer to Dean

as bisexual. These fans attempt to find ‘evidence’ of this within the narrative only to justify their desire to see explicitly romantic/sexual Destiel content, rather than the desire to see ‘positive’ bisexual representation.²⁰ William shared similar sentiments when he argued that many Destiel fans “are pushing for a ship instead of representation.” These participants are criticising the use of identity politics by other fans as a means to gather ‘evidence’ of queerness, both to prove creator intentionality and to justify their desire to see explicit sexual/romantic content between two characters. This has resulted in many fans, such as Cameron and William, feeling frustrated. Their frustration stems from the perceived co-option of representational and identity politics to further a project of explicit content for a ship. This criticism and frustration also speak to a clear demarcation and privileging of authentic and sincere intentions to see queerness. Rather than wanting explicit queer images as part of a larger project of progressivist media politics, fans that co-opt the rhetoric of diversity and identity in order to justify their personal ships are seen as having inauthentic investments.

Although many of the fans I interviewed held more nuanced beliefs about sexuality, they invariably identify queerness in queerbaiting texts as same-sex desire. Such desire is believed to manifest either through coming out with a “queer” identity, or explicit romantic/sexual content between two men or two women. Yet, several problems and contradictions emerge with this political impulse. Patrizia illustrates one problem when pointing to the decision of the *Supernatural* writers to make the character of Chuck come out as bisexual without ever including scenes in which he displays explicit romantic/sexual attraction to another man. “I could literally hear writers going ‘and now Chuck is bi, fandom will love it!’,” she writes, “it’s not negative, but saying hi I’m bi and nothing else is not representation ... it starts feeling disingenuous when it’s done not for the sake of telling a story but to make their representation level higher.” Again, calls for diversity in media within queerbaiting politics are fraught with difficulties and contradictions. Whilst fans utilise identities as markers of same-sex desire, in order for this to be authentic it must be coupled with the explicit desire for another same-sex character while still “telling the story.” This is especially difficult when bisexual characters engage in sexual activity with another gender. Such attraction and affection are equally affirming of their bisexuality, yet fail to deliver the representational expectations based on identities.

Fan critiques of queer audience exploitation, homophobia and heteronormativity in media may seem in line with queer theory and scholarship on queer readings of popular media

²⁰ The notion of ‘positive’ representation will be examined in greater depth in chapter four of this thesis.

texts. However, there seem to be fewer displays of the same variety of feelings, subjectivities and identifications with queerness that were so important to earlier scholars. A tension emerges when fans utilise identities in an attempt to call for diverse media representations—or indeed to demonstrate the representational harm of queerbaiting—whilst maintaining their queer readings of purported straight characters and narratives as legitimate. This legitimisation of queerness is even more complicated by the politicisation of the fan--creator relationship in the current climate. In order to demonstrate the representational harm of queerbaiting, fans place the power of authoritative meaning-making into the hands of creators so as to ‘expose’ acts of intentional exploitation. A shift in queer political subjectivity emerges in the problem of the impossibility of a definitive queerness and the impulse to lay blame and claim victimhood. The project of recognising queerness as always already present in all texts seems to be at odds with the need to locate intentionality and the evacuation of agency within queerbaiting. Unlike earlier queer poststructuralists, the saliency of “queer” is inherently tied to the authorisation of authorial intent.

Queerness and authorial intent

Rather than seeing their interpretation of the narrative as queer as just one of many possible and equal readings of the text, many fans see it as *the* meaning. Within queerbaiting debates, fans have refigured and objectified queerness. They position it as something that can be located within the text at the primary textual level, over which, they argue, the writers have full knowledge and control. As I have argued, instead of seeing queerness as residing in all texts, as earlier queer poststructuralists suggest, fans attempt to locate queerness as singular and definitively defined. They then utilise the notion of a singular, authentic narrative in this way to ‘expose’ the intentionality of the queerness they see, and therefore, the exploitative nature of queerbaiting. This contest between audiences and creators is essentially a contest over the notion of an authentic story. Vannini and Williams (2009) understand authenticity to refer to an “inherent quality of some object, person or process” (2) that signifies the “objectification of the process of representation” (3). Within the discourse of queerbaiting, queerness has become objectified by fans through contests over textual meaning. Through these contests, queerness is positioned as something ‘in’ the text—something that can be identified and read—over which fans and creators debate meaning. Queer poststructuralists and contemporary fans involved in queerbaiting debates

both attempt to locate queerness within the text. However, queer poststructuralists are clear to separate the intentions of creators, or the presumption of intentions, from any legitimacy of queer readings. In contrast, creator intentionality is at the heart of queerbaiting accusations and criticisms.

In their focus on creator intentionality, fans position the contest over meaning and their relationship with creators as a struggle for power. Henry Jenkins argues that the subordination of the productive practices of fans, in which their interpretation of the narrative differs from the supposed intention of creators, simply mirrors the distance of fans from the production of the television show itself (2012, 6). Meyer's analysis of the power of camp as queer parody also demonstrates the significance of authenticity in the preservation of power. He asserts that "[w]hen parody is seen as process, not as form, then the relationship between texts becomes simply an indicator of the power relationships between social agents who wield those texts, one who possesses the 'original', the other who possesses the parodic alternative" (1994, 9). The "original" for Meyer is the authentic narrative at the heart of this struggle between fans and creators within queerbaiting. Fans see the authentic narrative as characters being queer, whereas creators emphatically "deny and laugh off the possibility" (Fathallah 2015, 491), reinforcing their own heterosexual interpretation as the authentic story. But what is the authentic story? Who has knowledge, access, and control over it? By questioning what is the authentic, true story, as criticisms of queerbaiting suggest, fans are ultimately challenging the authority of the creators over the presumed textual meaning. Fiske argues that the "reverence, even adoration, fans feel for their object of fandom sits surprisingly easily with the contradictory feeling that they also 'possess' that object, it is *their* popular cultural capital" (1992, 40, original emphasis). This "contradictory feeling" still underpins the contemporary struggle for control over meaning and the authority of the authentic canon.

The very definition of queerbaiting presumes an imbalance of power and authority. In an effort to criticise the intentional exploitation of audiences' desire to see same-sex affection on screen, fans place all control over the meaning of the text firmly in the hands and minds of "the powers that be" (TPTB), which is a fan term used to refer to "whoever is making the decisions" (Nordin 2015, 61). The term "queerbaiting," in its traditional usage, infers that creators have control over the production of authentic textual meaning and they are baiting audiences with the promise of explicit queer content. This definition may seem like a defeatist notion. However, by placing all of the knowledge and control on to "the powers that be," fans are able to position queerbaiting as the direct *intention* of the

creators. If TPTB are in complete control over the production of textual meaning and fans are reading queerness from the text, then, in turn, TPTB must have intentionally put it there. The logic implies that TPTB control the narrative and the meaning produced and, therefore, the queer subtext or homoeroticism read by so many fans must be deliberate and, thus, exploitative.

This “contradictory feeling” that Fiske writes about presents fans claiming ownership over their textual object of fandom with the authority granted to them by their ostensible queer identity. They own the queer meanings in the text and they have been granted the authority to read and interpret them from their authentic queer identity. However, in a context in which notions of intentionality and exploitation are foundational, fans shift authority onto the authorised authors in order to clearly delineate between the harmful creators, who have the power over the production of the text, and the queer viewers who are disempowered. Such disempowerment supposedly comes not only from their distance from the production of media but also by their queer identity within a heteronormative media landscape.

This model of power is connected to a larger politics of victimhood utilised by fans. Claims of victimhood are a pivotal means through which the contemporary political landscape is constructed and how people constitute themselves as political subjects (Horwitz 2018). It is through this subjectivity that victims assert they have suffered wrongs that require recognition and justice. As Roger Lancaster writes, “Nothing, it would seem, causes the individual to stand out against the mass more than a story of suffering, and nothing induces more empathy, goodwill, and other shows of social support than the claim that one has been victimized” (2011, 7). This claim to victimhood for fans is not only crucial for their criticisms of the harms caused by queerbaiting, but the subsequent call for positive representation. Explicit queer representation is the reparation demanded when a claim of victimhood is made. As argued above, authorial intention is foundational to this claim of victimhood, as fans presume the creators are in control of queer textual meaning produced and thus, the deliberate and harmful exploitation of queer viewers.

Many of the responses from creators to these criticisms in turn shift their denial of queerbaiting from an exploitative or homophobic intention to the preservation and integrity of an authentic story. Jeff Davis, creator of *Teen Wolf*, stated at a fan convention that he would support the character Stiles coming out as bisexual “if it’s right for the story” (VestPiper 2012). The creators are not guiding the story, but rather, as Davis’ response seems to imply, they are merely vessels through which the story is being told. Davis

positions “the story” as having one authentic meaning interpreted by him and elevated above the opinions of the audience. In shifting their denial of queerbaiting onto the preservation of the integrity and authenticity of the ‘real’ story, creators also highlight a “contradictory feeling” of ownership over the production of meaning. They position themselves, rather than fans, as having knowledge, access and control over the authentic story. However, they also shift responsibility and criticism of homophobic or exploitative intentions by stating that they are merely vessels through which an authentic story is being told. At the 2015 San Diego Comic Con, *Supernatural* writer and producer Jeremy Carver responded to a fan’s question of why they chose to kill the character Charlie, the only recurring gay character: “When we’re in the writers’ room we have to go where the story takes us” (Flicks and the City 2015). In a similar vein, Tyler Hoechlin, who plays Derek on *Teen Wolf*, responded to a question regarding the slash pairing, “Sterek,” stating that his acting is inspired by who the characters “really, actually are on the show” and therefore Sterek has “nothing to do with the work that I do” (Yomikoda 2014). Both of these responses simultaneously shift the emphasis from the potential intention of representational harm and/or queerbaiting onto the preservation of the authentic story. Yet, they also position creators as having the knowledge of the ‘true’ trajectory of the narrative and of who these characters *actually* are. Their commitment to the story is demonstrated by reinforcing their intention and control over meaning as the authentic narrative: “the story” is, thus, *their* story. These demarcations of the authentic story become especially problematic when such textual meaning is seen to be queer by fans. What prompts fans to read queerness from texts that creators mostly deem to be heterosexual and that seemingly contradict what is deemed to be the authentic meaning?

Seeing queerly

Queer scholarly readings of classic Hollywood cinema have suggested that gay, lesbian and bisexual audiences looked for certain subtextual or implicit cues in films (Russo 1987; Dyer 1993, 2002; Fejes and Petrich 1993; Benshoff and Griffin 2006). Many of these cues were linked to the direct intentions of writers, directors and actors forced to find creative ways to circumvent censors. In a similar vein, many fans involved in queerbaiting debates suggest that their own queerness allowed them to read queerness from the texts and to pick up on things that would otherwise pass unnoticed by heterosexual viewers. One fan argues that “it comes from experiences in reading real-life subtext, trying to figure out if a woman

you see across the room is queer or not. Since the consequences for mistaking a straight woman for a queer one are usually pretty negative, queer women are better at looking for those cues” (Lena, 26, bisexual). Lena suggests that her experience of being queer, that is, the invisibility of queerness and the fear of homosexual panic, has allowed her to notice cues, subtext, gestural codes and signifiers of queerness as a survival technique. An important distinguishing factor in the experience of being queer is that it does not project external signifiers to the same degree as race or gender (Gluckman and Reed 1997, 4). The performative action of coming out clearly demonstrates the initial invisibility of queerness. There are, however, signs, gestures, expressions, stances and clothing that are taken to bespeak an identity of same-sex attraction (Dyer 1993, 19; Sender 2004, 95). It is this set of signifiers that, in making the invisible visible, constitutes any sort of representation of queer people. It is the experience of being queer that more or less enables queer people not only to read and understand these signs, but, as is the case for many of my participants, actively seek them out. Participants spoke about longing for queer representation that drove them to actively seek it. Laura referred to this ‘active’ viewing when she spoke about the distance between her queer readings and mainstream readings of popular film and television: “I agree that sometimes I am reading too much into things, but the reason for that is because, as a queer viewer, I have to read into things to find myself represented. If you see your sexuality represented everywhere, you don’t have to search for it, but as a queer viewer you often do have to go digging!” Although recognisability is essential for any sort of representation, for fans like Laura, this recognisability goes hand in hand with her desire to see this representation. Laura is thus compelled to actively search for these signs of queerness, for signs of herself.

Lena also suggested that queer women are more motivated and better equipped to “[look] for those cues” that signify that another woman is queer. The representational strategies utilised in queerbaiting texts point to what John Fiske calls “points of purchase” (1988, 247) that allow viewers to find meanings that are significant to them (also see Clark 1991). When these points of purchase are queer, this tactic becomes what Melanie Kohnen (2011) describes as “seeing queerly.” What do these strategies look like for fans in their readings of queerness? What are the cues that point to queerness? Lena went on to describe what she believes many queer viewers saw in *Rizzoli and Isles* (TNT, 2010--2016), a police procedural that follows detective, Jane Rizzoli and medical examiner, Maura Isles who have been at the centre of many queerbaiting debates. “I think what made people ship Rizzoli and Isles”, Lena writes, “is that you had two female characters who cared deeply about

each other, had chemistry, and fit a kind of butch/femme relationship.” It is the specific dynamic of butch/femme that is recognisable to Lena as a sensibility distinctly associated with queer women (also see Case 1988; Clark 1991). Although this reading seems to be more associated with specifically queer cultural signifiers, many fans also read queerness through heterosexual romantic tropes:

If one of them were female, no would ever read it as anything but romantic. (Hunter, gay, writing about Steve/Bucky from the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*)

I believe that if either of those characters were female, they would have been a couple for a while. (Liana, bisexual, writing about Dean/Castiel from *Supernatural*)

Any of these things when done by a man and woman on a show would very likely be indicators of a budding romance. (Anna, lesbian, writing about Kara/Lena from *Supergirl*)

These fans draw on dominant romantic scripts of heterosexual culture to locate evidence of queerness within popular texts. These heterosexual romantic scripts, however, are still formed through fans seeing queerly. The attention to detail, the noticing of these subtle cues of prolonged eye contact between two characters, for example, are not unlike the survival skills queer people have historically used to identify one another. Richard Dyer contends that the prevalence of “style” among the gay community is a noticeable mark of queer oppression and connected to queer people’s ability to notice details and subtle cues:

... we find it easy to appear to fit in, we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, forms and appearances of different social circles. And why? Because we’ve had to be good at it, we’ve had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in – we couldn’t afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms: style. (2002, 59)

For many of the fans interviewed, their queerness has brought them to these texts already trained to read queerness in ways that may go unnoticed to heterosexual viewers. Elizabeth Bridges argues that this is essentially the mechanism through which creators are able to engage in queerbaiting, by “having their cake and eating it too” (2018, 119). Highlighting the clear similarity with marketing discourses around the gaze and gay window advertising, she suggests that creators exploit the desire and ability of fans to read queerness whilst

heterosexual readers remain ignorant, all the while relegating queerness to the realm of the subtextual: the closet of connotation.

While queer poststructuralism has long suggested that textual meaning is not reliant on authorial intent for its legitimacy, it must be noted that queer signs are all dependent upon the knowledge and transmissibility of their signifiers. That is, to see queerness in a text, one must presume to know what “queer” looks like. This understanding of a text or image as queer relies on other representations and experiences to inform that understanding; knowledge of representations is made up of previous representations that contribute to the recognisability through which audiences view media (Dyer 1993, 2). However, despite the fact that knowledge of queerness only exists through personal, cultural and historical memories of representations, many fans drew on the notion of experience as the primary provider of knowledge. They utilise their identities as credentials in the production of ‘authentic’ queer stories. When asked about the capability of straight writers to write authentic queer characters, for instance, 21-year-old lesbian and fanfiction writer, Anna replied:

I think it's that it tends to fall into relying on the same stereotypes and patterns that have defined mainstream LGBT media in the past. The only experience straight/cis writers often have with queer topics comes from those previous media, or secondhand from friends or from the general ideas that society holds about queer life and people. Media tends to have a very narrow view of the queer experience when no actual queer people are involved.

Anna explicitly asserts that straight people's knowledge and understanding of queerness can only ever be secondary to queer people's lived experience. The focus on identity as evidence for experience not only presents a universalising image of truth that identity purportedly encapsulates, but it further privileges the notion of ‘experience’ as a signifier of this truth. By pointing to the experience of identified people as evidence, Anna leaves aside the constructed nature of experience. She leaves aside how one perceives their experience through language, about how one's vision is constructed and how this difference is articulated discursively, that is, how experience and representation are intimately entangled. Anna later points to this “evidence of experience” (see Scott 1991) to suggest that ‘authentic’ queer representation can thus only come from actual queer people: “I also think that best queer representation in media is stuff that is actually written by queer people and performed by queer actors. They are the only ones who can give us authentic fictional content, because when straight/cis people write queer content, it never

feels quite right.” There is a privileging of primary experience for the understanding, and thus, representation of queerness amongst many fans. This primary experience for them can only come from an identity that inevitably corresponds to an authentic queer experience.

However, the ability to understand and represent straightness was not held to the same standard. That is, for fans, queer people are able to create authentic heterosexual stories, but heterosexual people cannot create authentic queer stories without the input of an actual queer person. One fan explains that queer people are able to transcend the restrictions of identity and experience because of their position as a minority:

The fact of the matter is that queer folks can “speak straight” but straight folks (even the staunchest allies) can’t speak fluent queer. Queer folk have to be able to speak straight because we live in a straight world. Loud as we are we are still the minority by a huge margin. So in order for a queer character to have an authentic voice a queer person needs to be involved. (DW)

This ability to “speak straight” draws on the idea of “seeing queerly” as a language that one learns, giving queer people an ostensibly double vision. The intricacies of queer representation—the subtextual hints and cues, the eye contact, the bodily comportment—all lend themselves to the idea of fluency, of an acquired ability to see and read that many queer people believe they have been forced to develop through necessity.

The use of identity politics is clear here when, as Joan Scott writes, “identity is taken as the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices and meanings, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category, a set of shared traits and/or experiences” (1995, 14). Rather than viewing identity itself as constructed, Lena suggests that “queer” speaks to a fixed set of customs, practices and meanings that correspond to an experience that enables women to “look for cues” of same-sex attraction in other women. However, within “queer” there still exists a privileging and moralising of authority in the telling of stories. Can a gay man tell an ‘authentic’ story about a lesbian woman? Can a lesbian woman tell an ‘authentic’ story about a bisexual woman? Moreover, the universalising of same-sex desire in these arguments of authenticity and identity politics partly erases the entanglement of oppressions and experiences such as misogyny or biphobia within the gay and lesbian community.

The use of identities as credentials in the telling of authentic queer stories also worked in reverse for fans. They pointed to the ability of straight people to read the queerness they see as evidence of its existence in the primary textual meaning:

A lot of my friends that I've shown the show to (both men and women NOT in the LGBTQ community) have seen the chemistry between them without me saying anything. (Kara on *Supergirl*)

For a while after the first movie I think I did? Just the way it was written – the shower scene, Chloe's continual implied interest in Beca – and the fact that my straight friends and family had also noticed and commented on the subtext of the relationship made it seem more weighted than usual queerbaiting. (Laura, on whether she thought Beca/Chloe from the *Pitch Perfect* film franchise would ever become canon)

The essential contest at the heart of the phenomenon of queerbaiting is one over textual meaning. Fans read queerness from these texts and assert that creators of media intentionally put it there to 'bait' them with the promise of explicit or manifestly queer content without ever following through. As I have demonstrated, some fans suggest that an identity that corresponds to experiencing same-sex attraction provides the ability of viewers either to read queerness that otherwise straight viewers would overlook, or be able to produce 'authentic' queer stories. However, a problem emerges from the argument that straight people's ability to see this subtextual queerness is moralising and legitimising 'evidence' of the queerness that fans see and, therefore, the existence and exploitative nature of queerbaiting. This ironically privileges the straight gaze in their attempt to distance themselves from it whilst simultaneously removing the potential playful act of reading queerness into/from texts that traditionally may go unnoticed by other viewers. This playfulness was ever-present in queer poststructuralist recuperative readings of cinema, yet seems to have, for the most part, disappeared in the contemporary politics of queerbaiting.

Pleasure and playfulness

The prevailing belief underpinning queerbaiting discourse is that fans are disempowered and experience harm when the promise of queer representation is broken. They make claims to victimhood which both unite them through an identity as vulnerable victim, as well as assert that harm has been done by creators to which reparation in the form of positive queer representations should be made. The impassioned readings of queerness by fans are viewed by many of them, as well as some scholars, as an act of defiance and of survival. Queer readings are seen to resist a heteronormative media landscape as well as

homophobic and/or exploitative creators. Elliot and Fowler position queer readings of *Teen Wolf* in this way:

... fans have developed tools to cope with queerbaiting as a media practice. Because queerbaiting has become so ubiquitous, so familiar, so tiring, fans have come to expect little canon representation from texts that queerbait, but, nevertheless, can and will continue to craft mere subtext into fully realized queer representation of their own. If queer reading is indeed a straying from the path, it is clear that fans have learned to survive in the woods. (2018, 162)

But this practice of “craft[ing] mere subtext into fully realized queer representation of their own” that Elliot and Fowler describe could potentially be seen as playful, imaginative, creative, such as in early slash fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than viewing these seemingly subversive practices as mere ‘survival,’ I contend there is also space to see the positive potential, or even empowerment, in moments of homoeroticism that are so often accused of queerbaiting.

Although most of the fans I interviewed focused on the exploitative and harmful nature of queerbaiting rather than their defiant acts of queer readings, some did share sentiments regarding their ownership over an ‘authentic’ queer textual meaning. For instance, Sam, a 31-year-old heterosexual woman, was adamant in her belief that Dean from *Supernatural* is queer regardless of the intentions of the writers:

[Dean is] a fictional character written by 10+ people on any given week. If I want to keep about 10% of his character as maybe-queer as part of my interpretation of him, I won’t really give a damn what the writers might try to do to quell that. Anything they make him do or say as a straight guy, I’d just toss into the 90% category of Dean’s orientation.

In spite of creators often being positioned as “the powers that be” in an effort to label their actions as intentional and exploitative, Sam takes this power for herself. She disperses authoritative control to “10+ people on any given week” to legitimise her reading of Dean as one of many possible and equal readings of him, regardless of the apparent imbalance of power in the production of the show. She also refuses to allow her readings of Dean as queer to be delegitimised by the *Supernatural* creators. Instead, she uses language that seems to dismiss any position of disempowerment by stating: “I won’t really give a damn what the writers might try to do.” While this is evidence of Sam retaining Dean’s queerness for herself, she places the canon as the authorising figure here, with the writers still holding power over it. The 90% of Dean’s heterosexual orientation for her is controlled by the

writers and authorised by the canon. Even in playful departures from what the writers seemingly intend, the power of their Author figure is still reinforced. In spite of this power, this quote was the most explicit attempt at delegitimising authority and power from creators in order to maintain queer readings of certain characters by fans.

The relegation of queerness into the subtext—the always-deniable closet of connotation—can provide some viewers with pleasure in actualising the homoerotic subtext into their explicit text of interpretation. Michael Bronski asserts that gay window advertising was successful because gay coding is appealing only insofar as it is hidden or subtextual and must be deciphered by viewers who are in the know: “as long as gay male sexuality is considered extraordinary, inviting as well as taboo, gay images will have this kind of appeal” (1984, 187).²¹ Although contemporary arguments around queerbaiting point to the apparent hesitation of media creators in permitting their television show or film to appear ‘too gay,’ there seems to be an absence of discussion of the pleasure and excitement available to audiences in seeing queerly. Instead of viewing queerbaiting purely through the lens of exploitation and representational harm, some fans relished the pleasure and excitement that subtext and connotation provide. Katherine Sender considers this point in her analysis of gay window advertisements: “ads that require a campy, subtextual, insider knowledge to ‘get it’ may offer more pleasure to gay audiences than more explicitly gay, potentially stereotypical images do” (2004, 128). The “insider knowledge” that DW said allows queer people to “speak queer” provides more pleasurable and exciting viewing and fandom than perhaps more overt and potentially stereotypical or otherwise unfavourable queer representation. As Melissa Hofmann observes, some pleasure is experienced by slash fans of *Sherlock* in their decoding of queerness and in revealing or illuminating the ‘truth’ of the source text. Such pleasure, she writes, comes from the sense of power attached to the authority of being able to produce meanings. In this example, fans are granted legitimacy and authority in their perceived ability to decode meanings of the source text, and therefore the canon, rather than extrapolate from queer subtext.

When this hidden language or subtext is erotic, as some slash fans may experience, the feelings of pleasure, excitement and potential arousal may be heightened by the sense of transgression (Neville 2015, 202). Sensing a hidden erotic charge provides some fans with pleasurable feelings engaging in taboo. For one fan, Callum, a 34-year-old gay man,

²¹ Although Bronski’s analysis is largely restricted to gay men, other scholars such as Clark (1991) and Haineault and Roy (1993) have suggested that lesbian imagery has been used in this way to appeal to consumers.

actualising the subtextual queerness in his fan art and fanfiction is part of the pleasure of homoeroticism:

... while I would certainly like it even more had they made [Scott/Isaac and Theo/Liam from *Teen Wolf*] even more explicit, I still think the scenes they were given were terrific and added a lot to my enjoyment of the show in general. I think what they tried to do is plant a bunch of seeds and leave it to the fans to tend to them. They know they're making this show in a world where fanfiction exists, and they like to throw us a bone pretty regularly. It's like, here's the ball, you guys run with it.

Joseph Brennan's (2018) promotion of the term "slashbaiting" is an attempt to redress this erasure of pleasure from the homoerotic possibilities in texts accused of queerbaiting. Like Callum, Brennan highlights the potential for fans to be baited into producing slash fiction. Such baiting can be a source of playful fun, rather than harm from being baited into believing that a character or characters will become explicitly gay, lesbian or bisexual. Queerbaiting, as it is traditionally understood by fans, suggests something that is being taken away, that is, the hope of explicitly queer characters. Conversely, Brennan argues that "slashbaiting" provides fans with the gift of homoeroticism and invites them to actualise and create queerness outside of the primary text. However, even the use of "baiting" in this term suggests that fans are being duped, tricked, or in other ways manipulated by media creators. The term produces an image of a disempowered and exploited fan, even if the object with which they are being 'baited' shifts. Moreover, many fans would reject the implications of this term. They would reject the notion that they can or should enjoy the queerness in their slash fiction, as they believe that their accusations of queerbaiting are doing a service to the text by bringing attention to the existence of queerness, as well as criticising what they perceive to be a homophobic and exploitative industry tactic (see Hofmann 2018, 4.7).

In Callum's portrayal of the pleasure he receives from the homoeroticism in *Teen Wolf*, he presents a dynamic between himself and the creators in which both parties are participants in the queerness presented. He points to the intentions of the writers as deliberately providing fodder for him to "run with it." Emily Roach similarly points to intentionality in her analysis of accusations of queerbaiting against former *One Direction* band member Harry Styles:

... perhaps there is a fully intentional ambiguity, not to lure in queer fans for economic gain, but rather to give fan communities the creative freedom to make Styles into whoever they want him to be, in a way that empowers and inspires them,

as they explore the queer possibilities and transformative power of fiction and, perhaps, discover something about themselves in the process. (2018, 183)

But where does this line exist for fans between empowerment and exploitation? As Lucy Neville writes in her analysis of women that enjoy viewing male/male erotica: “There is a clear division here between [slash fans] who view the unrealised or latent sexual tension between male characters as a form of queerbaiting, and those who enjoy the furtive nature of the characters’ (possible) desire” (2018, 101). This division for many fans, like Callum’s description of his pleasure in watching homoerotic moments in *Teen Wolf*, focuses on the intentions of the writers and the knowledge of fans of the ultimate narrative arc for the sexuality of the characters:

... there are ships you just know are never going to happen, and the writers/directors/actors can still give you some fun interaction, like Bruce and Tony [from the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*], who can be pretty flirty, and it’s just a fun thing for fans to squeal over and have fun talking about/writing about VS things like Destiel [from *Supernatural*] and Nygmobblepot [from *Gotham*] where the creators are putting it in the text. (Charlie, 34, queer)

Charlie states that the restrictions for slash ships to be playful rather than exploitative are when fans “just know” they will never be together in a sexual/romantic relationship. How fans know is unclear, but it seems to rest on creators conveying their intentions: Bruce/Tony can be flirty and fun however the creators provide no implication—textual or paratextual—of their eventual romantic/sexual relationship, whereas the *Gotham* creators have supposedly continually utilised the Nymga/Cobblepot relationship to entice fans. Chiisana, a 53-year-old, non-binary *Supernatural* fan asserted similar beliefs about the line between playful subtext and exploitation that seemed to rest on shared knowledge between fans and creators about whether the characters will *actually* be canonically queer or not.

As long as there is a reasonable belief by the content creators that they and the fans are on the same page, I think subtextual nods to shipping can be fun and in a spirit of enjoyment for everyone involved. But once the creators are aware that a significant percentage of the audience is expecting something from the content that they don’t actually have any intent of delivering, and yet continue to hint that they might, then that to me feels disrespectful of the fans/audience as consumers of the product.

Queerbaiting in its reception seems to rely on the knowledge of how the characters will end, which is knowledge placed purely in the hands of the creators to impart to audiences. To be “on the same page,” it seems, is required for fans to find pleasure in moments of

homoeroticism and their creative and imaginative endeavours that might follow. Fans must know that these moments will never lead to explicit same-sex attraction. With such knowledge there is no ‘bait.’ However, many writers working in the format of a television series may not know the trajectory of a character and therefore will not have this required knowledge to impart to the fans in order to safeguard against unintentional queerbaiting. Further, within queerbaiting debates, many creators of shows have insisted that they are not queerbaiting and that the characters are in fact straight. They insist that any queerness fans read is either ‘wishful thinking’ or unintentional, in line with Judith Fathallah’s definition of queerbaiting that points to creators “denying and laughing off the possibility” of queerness (2015, 491). The attempt by fans to clarify the line between exploitation and playfulness by pointing to creators, making clear that there is no possibility of explicit queerness, does not seem to be as evident in practice. Despite privileging creator intentionality in their relationship to queer readings, the contest over authentic (queer) textual meaning remains present. Therefore, any attempt to enforce a universal rule that obliges creators to make clear their intentions regarding the future of their characters will inevitably fail in its attempt to alleviate harm felt by fans. The pleasure in seeing queerly, I argue, is important to consider not *instead* of the harmful associations of queerbaiting, but as an alternative dynamic that exists alongside it, with queer images leaving some fans feeling exploited and others empowered.

Conclusion

As I explored in the previous chapter, in the early days of slash fiction communities there was not the same level of political investment in authorial intention for the authorisation of queer readings as there seems to be in contemporary queerbaiting discourse. For fans of Kirk/Spock, queer readings largely did not need to be legitimised (or delegitimised) by creators. In fact, their readings were intended to remain mostly hidden from creators and instead flourish in their subcultural fan communities. Queerbaiting presents a shift in the politics of slash. Queer readings, through a re-centring of the figure of the Author, authorial intent, and the singularity of meaning, are now embedded in the politics of identity and representation rather than playful subversion.

This chapter has highlighted a shift that presents new and interesting ways in which fans are conceptualising queerness, sexuality and identity. Whilst queer theory aims to decentre identity categories as a basis for political movements, which problematises the

notion of identity and sexuality as discursively produced through power relations, contemporary fans use “queer” as a means to call for diversity and inclusion in media as a catchall for the “alphabet soup” of LGBTIQAA+. Some fans in my interviews stated they learned about the meaning, usage and history of “queer” from microblogging sites like Twitter and Tumblr, from their friends, from gender/sexuality classes at university and, as Cameron stated, from sex advice columnist Dan Savage. For many fans, the “queer” in queerbaiting is rather separated from earlier queer theory’s conception of queerness. However, despite this contrast in queer political subjectivity in fandom, many fans did partially reject the notion of sexuality as an intrinsic orientation with identity reflecting this fixed, immutable characteristic of a person’s psyche. This apparent contradiction is where I observe a refiguring of identity politics. Categories are still used as bases of political movements, particularly in the affective positioning of fans within the dynamic of queerbaiting and wider representational politics. Such categories are also utilised to highlight the intentionality, privilege and responsibility that creators have in providing positive representation. I argue that this distancing of sexuality from traditional beliefs of it as a biological or immutable aspect of a person sits surprisingly easily within queerbaiting debates. As this chapter has demonstrated, calls for characters introduced as heterosexual to be seen as fluid and capable of experiencing same-sex attraction lend themselves to this idea of sexuality as mutable. Such mutability also demonstrates the desire for fans to achieve coherency and intelligibility. Sexuality being subject to change allows the new “taxonomy” of gender and sexuality (Cover 2019b) to capture such changing desires and experiences. As I have argued, it is through the proliferation of sexual categories that identities generate authenticity for fans and thus, salience in queerbaiting politics.

A further refiguring of identity politics is evident in fans straddling competing impulses between privileging queer identity and queer experience. This chapter illustrated that for fans, the term “queer” corresponds to an experience that enables their ability to both interpret and produce queer textual meaning. Yet, at the same time, they point to the capacity of straight people to read queerness as justification for its existence in the primary textual narrative. Another tension emerges in the very definition of queerbaiting that describes straight creators being able to not only read these subtextual hints and cues to queerness, but also produce them.

The prioritising of representational harm over playful acts of reading subversively speak to a wider politics of victimhood. I argue that such politics is foundational for queerbaiting

critique. This shift in political subjectivity from earlier slash communities through victimhood is mobilised through an affective politics of harm. The performativity of this harm and of the tropes of victimhood work to narrow or foreclose the possibility of enjoying the pleasures and playfulness in homoeroticism and subtextual queerness. By allowing their queer readings to have legitimacy, fans rely on queerness as escaping fixed definition, being able to be located in all texts. However, queerness is simultaneously conceptualised as singular and definitive within the context of queerbaiting to highlight the purported power dynamic between creators, who are intentionally exploiting audiences and fans, and disempowered in the production of textual meaning through a heteronormative media landscape. A politics of victimhood works to reconfigure queerness as definitive in textual meaning.

A tension emerges when we consider the function of agency within this queerbaiting dynamic. Whilst operating with an increasing level of agency through social media, as the previous chapter explored, fans nevertheless rely on their perceived position of disempowerment to claim victimhood from representational harm, and point to the intentions of creators and their responsibility in positively representing queer people (and to therefore not engage in queerbaiting). Moreover, despite the prevalence of negative affect and positioning themselves as without agency, Hofmann's study of the *Sherlock* fandom (2018) particularly highlighted how some fans derived pleasure from their sense of agency in the decoding or revealing of queerness within the text. In these moments, fans function as the Author figure in creating analyses and close readings of queerness in these texts. They revel in the authority and power that this position grants. However, this pleasure was only enjoyed outside the context of queerbaiting, in which fans did not perceive that creators meant to deceive them. Instead, the queer analyses that fans were producing were seen as revealing the truth of the source text, rather than their enjoyment of one of many possible and equal textual readings.

The conceptual understanding of queerness by fans generates multiple tensions in relation to identity politics, victimhood and visibility. The impulse of queer fans to engage in queer readings and their calls for diversity are mobilised for an affective politics of queerbaiting. I argue that, in its reliance on discourses of representational harm, this affective politics is foundational to the phenomenon of queerbaiting and contemporary politics surrounding queer media representation and queer fandom. The next two chapters will be devoted to exploring this mobilisation of affect within queerbaiting discourse.

Chapter 3: Representational Harm and the Queer Child

“[Queer people] deserve representation and we deserve entertainment that serves us. Think about the children growing up never seeing that and thinking it’s impossible. I was one of them.”

– Miles, 22, non-binary

It is worth revisiting the 2016 Twitter campaign #GiveElsaAGirlfriend referenced in chapter one. The campaign called for the character Elsa in the Disney film *Frozen* to be in a same-sex relationship in the sequel, with some viewers reading Elsa’s narrative as an allegory for the experience of LGBTQ people. Whilst this ‘evidence’ was mentioned in some of the hashtags, most Twitter users instead opted to draw on contemporary representational politics to demonstrate the importance of their cause. As one user wrote, “#GiveElsaAGirlfriend because LGBT kids deserve to know that there is nothing wrong with them” (quoted in Dockterman 2016). The tweets understandably focused on young people, as they are the film’s target demographic. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the wider call for explicit queer representation is increasingly entangled in affective politics centred on the protection of children. Why are children frequently the focus of such political calls for better representation?

The quote from Miles in the epigraph of this chapter provides a helpful introduction. In the broader context of Miles’ interview, asking us to think about children implies that a child could experience harm from queerbaiting and other negative queer representation. Simultaneously, Miles connects this image to a memory of pain in which they look back to assert that they too were a queer child in need of queer representation that served them. However, I suggest that this use of the child is not strictly a conscious choice by fans to appear more politically salient in their criticisms. Rather, they perceive queerbaiting as causing them harm that is tied to pain they experienced as queer children. This pain is referenced either through sharing a personal memory, or through an imagined collective memory of the experiences of queer children. I argue that this affective political use of the child as a means to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting ultimately relies on conventional notions of childhood innocence.

Innocence is a discursive construction intertwined with children, often through discourses of vulnerability and asexuality, in which childhood and adult sexuality are kept at a safe epistemological distance. It seems to me that this impulse to utilise the child in queerbaiting politics is driven by the desire to empower young queer viewers with the knowledge of possible, happy adulthoods. As queer children are seemingly excluded from

heteronormative narratives of adulthood (such as marriage and procreation), fans argue for the empowerment of these children through queer representation. This representation provides them with the knowledge of visible possibilities of entry into these adult narratives. I observe that within such narratives, queerness becomes intelligible, liveable and authentic for fans.

Power is foundational to queerbaiting discourse. We can see this in the struggle for authority and control over the production of textual meaning between the adult creator and the young fan. I argue, however, that power also underpins the knowledge of possible queer futures. The model of power within these politics positions the representations of affirming queerness as something that creators possess and fans do not. For fans, the only way to resist disempowerment or the associated harm is to attempt to possess power. To possess these representations and to have the knowledge of possible queer adulthoods demonstrates a model of sovereign power criticised by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). I argue that fans take up these various positions of disempowerment through a collective use of politics of the child. Such positionality ultimately presents fans as operating without agency in the production of queer textual meaning.

Politics of the child

As noted above, innocence is routinely deployed in criticisms of queerbaiting and wider representational politics as a means to highlight the importance of *affirming* same-sex desire and gender nonconformity in children. Bridges (2018), for example, points to the vulnerability of queer youth and the harm done to them by queerbaiting. In her analysis of queerbaiting in the TV show *The 100* she states that

queerbaiting sends these young viewers the message that heterosexual romance is the universal standard and that queer characters are only ever Others whose lives and loves are unworthy of full representation ... LGBTQ youth are five times as likely to have attempted suicide, compared with their heterosexual counterparts, in large part due to family or peer rejection. In short, positive, healthy representation matters. (2018, 121–22)

The argument for Bridges is if young people are being harmed, then the practice must therefore be insidious and, as she later writes, “def[y] ethics” (129). Queerbaiting is seen to defy ethics because it purportedly compounds the harm done to an already vulnerable group by sending harmful messages to young viewers. Such messages close off queer

adulthoods from the realm of intelligibility and possibility. Children must, according to such politics, be provided with the knowledge that queerness in adulthood is possible. Contemporary representational politics demands that media should provide ‘innocent’ and ‘queer’ children with affirming imagery, a requirement that queerbaiting does not meet. The social category of childhood and the accompanying notions of innate innocence, purity and vulnerability are discursively constructed. Innocence is imagined in children, constructing our purportedly innate desire to protect this pre-existing state of vulnerability and purity. As explored in the previous chapter, there is a common cultural understanding of sexuality as an intrinsic part of a person’s psyche and as such representing a ‘natural’ impulse. Such essentialism may imply that these impulses are present in children. However, the belief of children as asexual presents a problem as sexuality is purportedly both present from birth, representing a biological impulse, and not present in children (Jordanova 1998, 18).

When presenting childhood as synonymous with innocence and purity, moreover, intersections between class and race and other dimensions of social experience are lost. Hodgson (2013) explores this in her analysis of the troubling trend of black children in the United States being formally charged and treated as adults in criminal procedures. By applying critical race theory to childhood studies, Hodgson asserts that ‘adult’ constructions of the child do not always correspond to what children actually say and do, such as commit crimes. When compounded with colonial ideas equating whiteness with (childhood) innocence and purity, black children become the victims of these constructions (see also Bernstein 2011). These children lose their ‘status’ as children when they embody markers that do not correspond to cultural markers of childhood innocence. The practice of charging predominantly black children as adults in legal proceedings highlights how race and class are ignored in order to protect the cultural myth of childhood innocence. The child, in an effort to keep children safe, becomes a political weapon when gendered, sexualised, and racialised subject positions are erased.

The image of a child has frequently been used in this way to defend society’s future, and oppose people and movements that are deemed to threaten such a future. It is through this very notion of childhood innocence that children are deployed as a political weapon. The child has not only been deployed as a weapon in opposition to queer rights, racial integration and feminism, but has in fact been adopted by progressive, liberal political movements as well. For example, Henry Jenkins writes in the introduction to his edited collection, *The Children’s Culture Reader*, that

The figure of the defenseless [*sic*] child has been consistently mobilized in both support of and in opposition to American feminism. Because women have carried special responsibilities for bearing and caring for children, their attempts to enter political and economic life have often been framed in terms of possible impacts on children and the family. (1998, 7)

Opposition to progressive movements often claim their purpose is to ‘protect children.’ However, rather than opposing this logic of centring children, progressive movements also insist upon their value for similarly protecting childhood innocence (see Cover 2012c). For some feminists, speaking as “mothers” gave them an ostensible link across racial and class divides; however, as Jenkins clarifies, this politics centred on motherhood allowed men to maintain their patriarchal dominance by justifying their continued presence in public life, whilst remaining negligible in the domestic sphere (1998, 9).²² Women were able to justify a public presence and voice through a collective experience of motherhood, yet were further bound to the domestic sphere through their enforced duties of child rearing. As explained above, opposition to queer and feminist movements often rely on the defence of ‘protecting children.’ Such defence implies that these progressive movements, whether intentional or not, serve to harm children. The harm is understood to be enacted by threatening children’s ‘natural’ state of innocence or the naturalised, heteronormative, patriarchal gender order inextricably tied to child rearing. Such innocence is understood to be separated from the adult world of sexuality and politics. Therefore, when feminist or gay rights movements attempt to justify their politics by insisting that they too are keeping children safe, they are often criticised by many queer theorists for re-centring children and a notion of childhood innocence. Such a re-centring, critics argue, reinscribes colonial, heteronormative and patriarchal politics.

This criticism has most notably been voiced by Lee Edelman in his foundational text *No Future* (2004). Edelman argues that contemporary politics rely upon a logic of futurity that is inherently intertwined with heterosexuality and what he terms “reproductive futurism.” He asserts that any politics that works to affirm a structure or authenticate a social order is conservative insofar as it is oriented in its intentions towards a future in the form of the child. The child, in short, serves as the face of a politics of reproductive futurism. Such politics centre on children’s protection in order to always look towards a

²² Second-wave feminism’s attempt to unify all women through motherhood has been critiqued by black feminists who argue that the liberation of black women cannot be achieved through the conceptualisation and challenging of misogyny and patriarchy through a white lens. Chapter five of this thesis will provide a more detailed discussion of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

more hopeful future. Edelman writes that “the image of the Child ... serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address” (2004, 11). The phantasmatic child and the futurity they promise is deployed as a strategy to foreclose the possibility of a politics outside of this domain. It renders ideological and political subjectivities and impulses in opposition to the protection of children as unthinkable: “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child” (Edelman 2004, 11). Edelman names queerness as this impulse to refuse to ‘think about the children’ or ‘fight for the children.’ When gays and lesbians respond to the conservative trope of *child protection* as a pretext for discrimination by insisting that they too value children, marriage and society’s future, Edelman argues that the subversive force of queer sexuality is lost. He asserts that just as queerness can only ever disrupt an identity, not constitute one, queer theory must necessarily be opposed to a politics that aims to affirm reproductive futurity.

But is the image of the child always inextricably linked to a heteronormative, reproductive futurity? Kathryn Bond Stockton’s (2009) theorisation of the queer child offers an alternative answer to this question. Edelman identifies the figure of the child as a weapon used against queers through the seemingly oppositional stance of an innocent and ideal future (child) versus a hedonistic, sexual present (queer). However, Stockton looks at the queer child to think about the ways in which this futurity is not necessarily heteronormative. She argues that children do not always ‘grow up’ into adulthood when adults say it is “time.” Rather, children can be in a state of “delay,” “suspension” and “backward birthing.” Yet it is precisely in these states that Stockton identifies the ways in which the child experiences “sideways growth,” moving just as much laterally as they do vertically. The child becomes a figure not of reproductive futurity in the service of heteronormativity, but of a sideways growth. This opens up a space for queers to find meaning in a growth that seeks alternative orientations to a heterosexual adulthood/future predicated on countering, resisting and delaying “growing up.”

The queer child, that is, the child queered by their same-sex desire and/or gender nonconformity, resists, or is refused, a heteronormative narrative of growth. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) has written about the dangerous trend in American psychiatry in the 1980s and 1990s to optimise a “heterosexual outcome” in adulthood by identifying “Gender Identity Disorder” in the DSM III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders). In 1973, the DSM removed homosexuality from its list of disorders and replaced it with gender identity disorder. Sedgwick argues that this replacement pathologised queerness in children in covert ways. Her article, aptly titled “How to bring your kids up gay” (1991), draws attention to the queer child by highlighting and criticising the elusive and insidious ways in which heterosexual adulthood is enforced upon childhood narratives of growth. Whilst removing homosexuality as a psychiatric illness may denaturalise sexual-object-choice, pathologising gender nonconformity in children “radically *renaturalizes* gender” (Sedgwick 1991, 21). This homophobic and transphobic regulation of gender identity in psychiatry is an example of the intense reaction to signs of gay incipience, motivated by a fantasy to erase homosexuality in adulthood.

Halberstam (2004) has similarly explored the regulation of “tomboyism” in girls within the wider context of growth into womanhood. He asserts that tomboyism is tolerated in girls if interpreted as their attempt to enjoy the same independence and freedom granted to boys in pre-adolescence. However, our culture demands that tomboyism be eradicated in girls once this begins to affect their entry into heterosexual adulthood. Whilst Halberstam does question what “tomboy” means in terms of sensibilities, activities and identifications it may entail, he uses the conventional understanding of tomboyism to highlight the variety of strategies used to temper the threat of queer adulthoods (211). The notion of childhood innocence is a way to temper the threat of queerness in children. However, this ‘queer threat’ is not simply founded on preventing the progression of gender nonconformity into adulthood. Rather, this threat is brought about by a childhood sexuality that plays into “the adult’s fears about his or her own desire, the threat posed by the sexual child [is] to the serenity of adult self-understandings” (2004, 82). Children are queer because they thwart any (comforting) recognitions of the self; to enforce innocence upon children, to enforce an asexuality or a not-quite-yet heterosexuality, is an attempt to gain or claim knowledge of who or what children are:

To argue that all children are queer, then, is not to argue that all children feel same-sex desire (which, for all I know, they do). Rather, it is to suggest that childhood marks a similar locus of impossibility, of murderous disidentification; the disidentification with childhood queerness presumes, in other words, to recognise it, and to recognise it by emptying it of reference to anything but an incipient normativity. Innocence is the term through which this disidentification is achieved, the term that is deployed to contain the queerness of the child. (Ohi 2004, 82)

Innocence, then, is a method through which the queerness of children is contained, tempered and erased. Childhood innocence and panic around child sexuality are so

intertwined that, in *Sex Panic and the Punitive State*, Roger Lancaster in fact claims that sex panics are “less about the protection of children than about the preservation of adult fantasies of childhood as a time of sexual innocence” (2011, 2). However, as introduced at the beginning of this chapter, critics of queerbaiting draw attention to the queer child, highlighting their innocence and vulnerability whilst simultaneously attempting to redraw narratives of growth away from a heterosexual adulthood. Innocence is deployed in queerbaiting debates as a way to highlight the vulnerability of children who experience same-sex desire/gender nonconformity. It is a method through which fans attempt to expose the powerlessness of children and the harm, therefore, inflicted upon them by queerbaiting. Media representation is fundamental for these fans in the project of reorienting queer children away from the rejection they may experience from heteronormative outcomes and life narratives, and towards an embrace of same-sex desire/gender nonconformity. One of the ways in which participants in my interviews attempted to ‘know’ children in this way, to recognise them *as* queer, was through a collective conception of an imagined queer child and by ‘looking back’ at their own queer childhoods.

Looking back at the queer child

As I have argued, the discourse of childhood innocence is evidence of our attempt to ‘know’ what children are. It is in this attempt that children are presumed to be not-yet-heterosexual, rather than actually experiencing the sexual desires of adulthood heterosexuality. Their sexuality, whilst sometimes acknowledged in Anglophone societies, is dismissed as innocent. “Children are not always deemed to be innocent of sexual impulses, desires, motives, and intentions,” Steven Angelides writes, “but these erotic or sexual drives, aspirations, and apprehensions are typically rewritten as themselves innocent: infantile, immature, protosexual, and un-adult-like” (2019, xii). However, debates around queerbaiting and representational harm frequently prioritise an imagined queer and innocent child to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting. Yet the child, queered through their own same-sex desire, is only ever queer through the act of looking back (Stockton 2009, 5). The child is unavailable to the present, adult self. Conceptions of childhood and what children *are* can only ever be understood as what we, as adults, are not. As James Kincaid writes, “The child is functional, a malleable part of our discourse rather than a fixed stage; ‘the child’ is a product of ways of perceiving, not something that

is there” (1998, 19). Thus, we cannot ‘know’ what children are outside of cultural and historical discourses that frame our attempt to know them (Burman 2008, 95; also see Plummer 1995).

Adults conceptualise the realities of children’s lives through their own earlier experiences and memories (Bohan et al. 2002). For example, when thinking about what the consequences of ‘negative’ stereotypes of queer people in media can be, Hunter, a 33-year-old participant, says it “makes it harder for queer youth to recognise their own identity.” Esther a 24-year-old lesbian says that “we’re entering a new age of acceptance. The people who watch these shows aren’t generally the older generations. It’s the younger generations who are very accepting and very much appreciate seeing LGBTQ+ representation.” Many fans in my interviews, like Hunter and Esther, based their criticisms of queerbaiting on the presumption of what they believed young people feel and think about queer representation and the kind of representation they want and need. This presents a potentially problematic communication across generational divides where young people’s experiences may not necessarily reflect the ways adults remember, conceptualise and politicise them (Russell and Bohan 2005).

Stockton writes about this idea through the “ghostly gay child” who does not exist until the adult comes out. She argues that the gay child can only ever appear through a “backward birth” (2009, 6). The phrase “I was a gay/lesbian child” is therefore a performative act of this backward birth in which the child is queered via the lens of adulthood sexuality, retroactively embodied through the act of looking back. However, as Sarah Chinn writes, the phrase “I was a lesbian child” evokes not just a sexuality, “but also a social, political, and cultural identity that intersects but is not fully coterminous with ‘queer’ or ‘gay’” (2013, 121). While not all fans in my interviews ‘knew’ their sexuality as children, many of them did remember having awareness of it from a young age:

I knew I was gay at a very young age (8th grade) but kept it under wraps until Ellen [Degeneres] came out in 1997. (DW, 38, lesbian)

Growing up, I knew I was gay from quite a young age, I think around thirteen. (Anna, 21, lesbian)

The act of looking back for these fans relied solely on their awareness of their desired sexual-object-choice. In remembering when they first began to ‘know’ their sexuality, many fans rarely used the word “child,” opting instead for phrases like “young age” or “when I was younger.” By avoiding the use of the word “child” or “kid” or some other

marker to demonstrate pre-pubescence when remembering their own childhood, are fans voiding sexuality in children in order to maintain their ‘innocence’? The category of “child,” however, is incredibly unstable; with reference to pre-, post- and pubertal youth, “child” encompasses shifting and often contradictory meanings across legal, cultural, historical and national discourse (Angelides 2019, xxvi–xxvii). Sexuality sits between childhood and adulthood, marking a gradual progression into appropriate sexual maturation when adults say it is “time.” I argue that by using the phrase “young person,” fans are able to infer sexuality during adolescence whilst still utilising the political saliency of childhood innocence to promote the importance of queer media representation. Angelides writes about this threat of child sexuality to the notion of childhood innocence:

According to the discourse of child sexual abuse, the traumatic kernel of a child’s sexual experience with an adult is formed, at least in part, by the child’s premature introduction into adult sexuality. This conceptualisation depends on the installation of sexuality as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood. (2004, 158)

Angelides argues that the notion of childhood innocence within discourses of harm (sexual abuse) relies on the binary of childhood and adulthood being clearly demarcated through sexuality. The logic follows, therefore, that for childhood innocence to remain preserved, (adult) sexuality or sexual agency must not be embodied pre-adolescence. However, this is not to suggest that children do not have a sexuality, or are always relegated to asexuality. In fact, as Angelides argues, “in traversing puberty, young teenagers are often seen as both erotic and innocent, although their eroticism is usually regarded to be an undeveloped precursor to mature adult sexuality” (2019, x). As argued above, sexuality in pre-pubescence is dismissed as infantile play, or otherwise as a form of protosexuality. The child, nevertheless, must not be evocative of (an adult) sexuality in order to maintain their innocence. What flows from the idea of childhood innocence is the adult imperative to protect children against the interventions and pollutions of adult life, most notably, sexuality as defined and conceptualised by adults (Aries 1998, 56). Perhaps “young person” exists at this dividing line between childhood and adulthood in which an apparent burgeoning of sexuality begins at the time adults permit it.

This binary of adulthood and childhood ascribes to children notions of vulnerability and innocence and a distinct separation from sexual agency. Nowhere else is child sexuality and sexual agency erased more than in discourses around sexual harm and, in particular, feminist politics and other movements that attempt to expose the harms of child sexual abuse. In order for child sexual abuse to be understood as harmful and exploitative, children

must be thought of as not embodying adult sexuality and sexual agency. Angelides (2004) argues that for queer theorists, this adult/child binary in the framework of sexuality is particularly problematic. Such a framework, he argues, ignores the inevitable entanglement of pairs in binary oppositions and the relationality inherent in power dynamics. Further, and I contend, more crucial to his argument is that “the desexualization of childhood has damaging psychological and psychotherapeutic consequences for child victims of sexual abuse” (142). The epistemological distance between child and adult sexuality as distinct poles of a binary opposition can potentially reinforce the harm done even to victims of child sexual abuse. As they may be unable to fully integrate not uncommon experiences of pleasure, sexuality and agency during the time of the abuse, feelings of shame, guilt and trauma may be exacerbated in victims.

The vulnerability of children in debates around queerbaiting rests on this idea of possession of power. In discourses of child sexual abuse, children are seen to be entirely powerless and are thus unable to give informed consent. Queerbaiting critics see young queer audiences as vulnerable to the harms of queerbaiting due to their apparent lack of power in the affirmation of their queerness in a heteronormative world and over the production or reach of media’s influence. However, Angelides makes clear that he is not suggesting that children contain equal or more power than adults in sexual encounters and abuse. Rather, he explains that we are all positioned differently within dynamics of power and that we all participate in power relations, including children. Therefore, any attempt to reduce harm experienced by child sexual abuse victims should not rely on notions of power that are grounded in strict binary oppositions between child and adult sexuality. Despite Angelides’ call, children are routinely positioned as powerless, particularly in criticisms of ‘negative’ representation. How are fans using this notion of child powerlessness in queerbaiting politics?

Knowledge and vulnerability

Criticisms of queerbaiting that draw on the child continually position children as embodying an innocent subjectivity grounded in vulnerability and lack of knowledge. As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, the affective politics of fans present the child as especially vulnerable to representational harm due to their lack of knowledge of possible queer adulthoods. When fans look back at their own childhoods or the imagined, collective experience of the queer child, children are understood to embody this notion of naivety and

lack of understanding gained through experience. One fan, Hunter, wrote that he mostly agreed with the opinions of Tumblr users regarding queerbaiting; however, “[s]ometimes some of the younger fans on [T]umblr get a little too enthusiastic and they’ll swear that a ship is canon, or that it’s been hinted left and right and I think that may be a bit of wishful thinking.” The act of wishful thinking here refers to fans believing that a male/male or female/female pairing of characters will become explicitly involved in a romantic or sexual coupling as intended by the creators. By highlighting their age, Hunter implies that younger fans on Tumblr are naïve to the intentions of the writers because of their lack of experience or youthful immaturity. Sarah, a 27-year-old non-binary lesbian also spoke about notions of youthfulness in response to a moment of queerbaiting in the television series *Sherlock*:

... it feels like ... I had faith in something for the first time since I was maybe thirteen. and that feeling of having faith and trust in something larger than myself, something that was going to change the world. It was almost spiritual and I just don’t think I’ll ever feel that way again. In a way it made me feel old ... old in that ... there was something joyful and childlike, in a good way, about trusting what I was seeing in front of me and trusting that a gay man knew better and was kinder than to queerbait me on a gay-friendly network. Because the world made sense, it made sense that I was seeing gay things written by a gay man and then there would be kissing. It was neat and tidy and it felt so good, but after that ... I just felt ... I was never going to trust like that again.

Sarah’s description of their painful response to realising they had been queerbaited by the writers of *Sherlock* is a striking example of the way in which childhood innocence demonstrates the desires of fans to ‘know’ themselves. Sarah writes about the feeling of knowing, of “trusting what I was seeing in front of me,” as childlike. Their experience with *Sherlock* mirrors the logic of harm typical in child sexual abuse discourses, as we have seen in this chapter. If sexuality is the line between childhood and adulthood, as common understandings of child sexual abuse imply, then a premature introduction to adult sexuality or intervention in child sexuality potentially causes harm to children. Sarah describes their feelings of watching *Sherlock* before they were queerbaited as joyful and childlike. However, they were forcibly removed from this childlike state when an adult destroyed their innocent and naïve trust in them. Sarah enjoyed the childlike state of knowing and trusting. The moment of queerbaiting retroactively destroyed these memories of enjoyment as they no longer represented childlike pleasures of knowing and trusting. Instead, these moments became evidence of exploitation. Sarah’s world no longer made sense as their trust in their ability to ‘know’ was betrayed.

The childlike state of naivety identified by my participants was often coupled with notions of vulnerability in children. Vulnerability proved to be fundamental to the conceptualisation and mobilisation of childhood innocence within queerbaiting politics. When asked what effect queerbaiting may have on young people, Frogg, a 22-year-old, asexual, Tumblr user, replied: “It may break them to the point where they would believe that they were just stupid and how could they be anything but hetero? It may make them angry, that their struggles are a joke.” Queerbaiting is harmful in the eyes of fans because young (queer) people are vulnerable to its negative effects, and therefore the responsibility of media creators to produce ‘positive’ queer representation is even greater. This responsibility is highlighted by James Kincaid when he writes that “an unhappy child was and is unnatural, an indictment of somebody: parent, institution, nation” (1992, 80). This indictment in response to childhood unhappiness demonstrates the vulnerability of young people so often utilised in politics.

Children are seen to be vulnerable as their happiness is purportedly out of their control. As they are understood to have no agency over their happiness, it is therefore the responsibility of adults (creators of media) to protect them and to minimise or erase all things that threaten their happiness, such as queerbaiting. Kara, a 20-year-old questioning²³ fan of *Supergirl*, stated that queerbaiting “sends a bad message, especially to any younger audiences.” The bad message is one that does not affirm queerness in young people, causing them unhappiness. However, Kara clarifies by stating that queerbaiting is *especially* harmful to younger audiences as they are vulnerable to the bad messages that queerbaiting supposedly sends. It is worth revisiting Bridges (2018), cited in chapter one, who suggests a parallel between contemporary queerbaiting and historical censorship of Classic Hollywood Cinema. She points to the censorship of explicit depictions of homosexuality by the Motion Picture Association of America, as well as the wider trope of “bury your gays” that saw gay and lesbian characters routinely killed on screen.²⁴ She asserts that queerbaiting is a contemporary continuation of these harmful tropes and censorship. As such, queerbaiting is seen to be all the more insidious as it exploits and further harms vulnerable audiences:

In detailing the context of BYG and queerbaiting by situating them within a coherent history of both legal and production codes that have contributed to the punishment of LGBTQ people, either in reality or on-screen, I have aimed to highlight an awareness of the effect media can have on vulnerable viewers, in this case young

²³ In the pre-interview survey, Kara listed her sexual orientation as “questioning.”

²⁴ Chapter four of this thesis examines this “bury your gays” trope and the function of ‘happiness’ in queerbaiting.

LGBTQ people, or any LGBTQ viewer who may have experienced trauma and rejection as a young person. When depicting a group of people with this history of pathologization, criminalization, punishment, trauma and ostracization, it defies ethics to continue producing stories that punish those viewers by proxy and in similar ways. (2018, 129)

In a footnote, Bridges clarifies her use of the term “vulnerable”: “I use the term ‘vulnerable’ here to refer to younger or closeted teen or young adult fans in unsafe or traumatic situations due to rejection or potential rejection by family and friends” (2018, 129). Vulnerability for Bridges is crucial in her criticism of queerbaiting as it is the powerlessness of these young queer viewers that makes them vulnerable to its harms. A clear model of power as age-based possession emerges here that proves foundational for Bridges and fans in their queerbaiting critique.

Creators of media possess power through the ability to hold and produce these representations, furthering feelings of exploitation. Vulnerability was utilised in this way to assert the responsibility of creators to produce queer representation that affirms young queer viewers:

Importantly, [queer representation] can also be a bit of an escape for many queer people who have a lot of difficulty with their identity in real life. Especially for young people, to see a manifestation of the idea that people like them CAN be happy and live a full life can be literally life-saving. The validation that comes with good queer representation can help us to mend the damage that homophobia can have on our confidence and happiness. (Anna, 21, lesbian)

I know I’m not going to be represented and I’m at peace. But imagine being a kid who is questioning their sexuality and they see that their favourite hero, Captain America himself, could be gay/bi. Imagine their joy and hope seeing someone so important being like them. But then the kid sees Sharon and Steve kiss, and the kid realises they’ve been played with, and that their sexuality is just a joke in the world. (Frogg, 22, female, asexual)

The experience of young queer people as vulnerable to having “difficulty with their identity” or “questioning their sexuality” provides the basis for many criticisms of queerbaiting. Fans draw on these images of vulnerable young queer people as an affective politic against what they view as exploitative and damaging media images. Whilst many fans spoke considerably about their own pain, frustration and anger at queerbaiting, it was the imagined child that was consistently drawn on to demonstrate queerbaiting’s apparent harms. This child, as I have argued, relies on notions of vulnerability and a distinct opposition between the supposed power of adults and powerlessness of children. How does

queerbaiting critique present reworkings of harm and power within these politics of childhood innocence?

Power, knowledge and representations

The underlying assumption in these affective politics of queerbaiting criticism is that media has a substantial influence over the formation and cultivation of a sexual identity and subjectivity. Fans view media as crucial for vulnerable queer young people to counter the harmful ideas they receive and internalise about queerness:

[Queer representation makes us] feel like we're seen as part of the society. Especially for kids who feel different from other kids and don't understand why, they have a right to have characters they can relate to just like any other kid. (Ari, 20, non-binary, bisexual, Brazil)

I think its important for people to see themselves in media. Media is a big part of how our identities are formed. (Chiisana, 53, non-binary, bisexual, US)

There were no lesbian characters I could look up to to show me that what I was feeling was normal and 'ok.' It is so important that we see ourselves reflected in our media. Because media helps to establish cultural norms. (DW, 38, female, lesbian, US)

I think representation is fundamental. I personally could not imagine myself with a woman in a relationship until I saw positive representation of it. Up until my middle 20s, lesbians were ... weird, conflicted, moody. (Patrizia, 33, female, bisexual, Italy)

As argued above, young queer people are considered vulnerable as they are denied the possibilities of happiness in adulthood that are inextricably bound to heteronormativity. Media, therefore, can provide affirming images of alternative possibilities, enabling an intelligible, queer futurity. As Hunter said, negative stereotyping in queer media “makes it harder for queer youth to recognise their own identity.” This is why, as another fan argued, queerbaiting is especially cruel to “younger kids desperate for representation” (Charlie). Rob Cover's analysis of queer youth suicidality aptly demonstrates this dominant understanding of vulnerability (2012a). By examining how non-normative subject positions are constituted within contemporary regimes of sexuality, Cover asserts that we can understand the ways “certain lives can be made unliveable through regulatory practices that position a subject beyond normativity” (15). In this way, images of queers in media that are not queerbaiting are viewed by fans as empowering. Fans are empowered by the

images of possible queer adulthoods that construct queerness as liveable.²⁵ It is precisely this power that is at the heart of queerbaiting.

Media creators accused of queerbaiting are frequently viewed as operating from a position of power over the production of media, with fans in a clear position of disempowerment. Rather than participating in power relations and playfulness by subverting ‘heteronormative’ media as in much earlier queer scholarship and slash fandom, contemporary fans position queerness as singular and definitively defined by the authorised creators of media (“the powers that be”). It is clear that contemporary queer political subjectivity for fans critical of queerbaiting relies on perceived operations of power. The model of power and agency in earlier accounts of slash fiction communities allowed fans to decentre the authority of the Author in the production of queer textual meaning, reparative readings, and community. For earlier slash fans, disempowerment came from the risk of being exposed or outed as a slash fan, requiring them to operate in secrecy and under the assumption that their writings and artwork would only be consumed by other like-minded fans. However, there was no attempt to mobilise around a position of disempowerment. There did not seem to be a strong push to encourage creators to move subtextual queer readings into the explicit, denotative textual level. Contemporary fans, however, have refigured notions of agency within the discourse of queerbaiting. Fans are perhaps exercising an increased level of agency in the age of social media, allowing them to engage in fan activism and speak back to creators of media. Yet, the utilisation of affective politics of representational harm to demonstrate intentionality and exploitation relies on an image of fans as stripped of agency. It is precisely this position of perceived disempowerment that allows them to effectively enact a politics of victimhood (see Lancaster 2011).

The politics of victimhood within queerbaiting discourse presents a liberationist model of power. In this model, power is conceived as an exterior force that oppresses essential ‘truths,’ such as sexuality. Michel Foucault (1976) most notably critiqued this model to suggest that sexuality is in fact discursively produced through power relations. Previous sexological, psychoanalytic, and liberationist conceptions of sexuality understood (and continue to be understood) it as an intrinsic aspect of humans oppressed by exterior forces. However, for Foucault, sexuality and subjectivity are constructed not outside of or before power, but through it:

²⁵ Chapter four of this thesis will examine the politics underpinning this liveability of queer adulthoods.

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individual subjects. (Foucault 1983, 212)

Gay liberation movements that take the category or identity of homosexuality as the foundation for their politics rely on this model of sexuality and power to oppose oppression. Power in early liberationist politics is understood to be a repressive force “against which truth, knowledge, and human freedom were opposed” (Angelides 2001, 147). Foucault, however, stresses the interconnectedness of these forces, not their opposition. He suggests that power connects and constructs truth, knowledge and freedom and it is through these discourses that we are constituted as individual subjects.

Within contemporary queerbaiting discourse, fans draw on a liberationist model of power in their criticisms. For example, in explaining why heteronormative society may be threatened by increased visibility of queers in media, Lena, a 26-year-old, bisexual fan stated that “[p]eople in power, or people who have a lot of representation, feel threatened when others get power or representation because I think they’re afraid they’ll one day be treated like those who have less power and representation”. There is a clear distinction between those who have power and those who do not. For Lena, and many other fans, representation is seen as both the visual indication of power as well as the means by which power can be attained. This model of power embodied through the visual representation of queers is foundational for fans in their conception of queerbaiting’s harms and the dynamic between (queer) fan and (hetero) creator.

I argue that this power is also crucial for conceptions of childhood and child sexuality in queerbaiting critique. As demonstrated in my interviews, queer media is seen to provide images of possibilities that affirm and empower young, vulnerable, queer viewers. Fans believe it is precisely this knowledge of queer adult liveability that can provide them with a level of power to counter homophobic and heteronormative ideas they have internalised. As Lena stated, representation is a key indicator and source of power. Many fans were keenly aware of this power dynamic in relation to children’s media. For instance, Hunter noted an example in the character Garak from the science-fiction television series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999). He explained that in the first two seasons, Garak was coded as gay and openly flirted with another male character. However, once the network executives “got wind of it,” they immediately introduced a heterosexual love interest for him. Hunter presumes that the executives “didn’t want the

controversy associated with a gay character. This was the mid-to-late 90s and *Star Trek* was understood to be a ‘family’ show—they presumably perceived same-sex relationships as not ‘family friendly’. I have no idea if they had personal animosity or if it was simply a business decision.” The notion of queerness as ‘inappropriate’ for a family show is another way that this power dynamic operates in favour of a heteronormative idea of ‘family.’ Criticisms of queerbaiting therefore attempt to expose this power dynamic in an effort to challenge the harmful ideas of sexuality being imprinted upon vulnerable queer audiences. For fans, this power dynamic is implicitly linked with age. The assumption is that creators of media are much older than the younger demographic of viewers. My participants conceptualised ‘older generations’ as being more homophobic and therefore less likely to permit positive queer representation:

[*The Good Fight*] only airs “online” via CBS’s streaming application. So the viewers are also more likely to be tech savvy, which also means younger ... which also means (typically) more liberal and open-minded. (DW, 38)

There will always be backlash [against having queer main characters in television], at least until a lot of the older generations pass away (as morbid as that sounds). They were all raised in a different time and their opinions were enforced and reinforced on them by everyone around them. (Esther, 24)

As an educator, I also realise just how much increased representation matters to young people. I have two students right now who are comfortable with telling their teachers that they identify as a gender other than their assigned one. That NEVER happened when I started my career, but the increased visibility and validity of other identities has given them the confidence to speak up. It's just a small example, but I'm so encouraged that better queer representation can only be a good thing. (Cameron, 34)

These examples indicate a very clear image of linear progress. This liberal belief asserts that social justice and social, political, and economic equality are gained in the passing of time, operating in a linear fashion. Their reliance on the mythical linearity of progress positions younger fans (and themselves) as not only holding less harmful beliefs, but also of being part of the progress that is undoing the harms of older generations (in which the creators of queerbaiting media are often grouped). The last quote from Cameron is particularly striking within this context of the politics of the child. Cameron suggests that the connection between “better queer representation” and her students telling their teachers of their trans identity demonstrates the clear political positioning of many of the fans within queerbaiting. This representation, the argument follows, “can only be a good thing.” Increased visibility is seen as a marker of and a method to social and cultural liberation of queer people, as evidenced by

young, vulnerable, queer people feeling comfortable about coming out at a younger age than in previous years. Her conception of the linearity of progress connected to queer visibility in media highlights a restriction in its politics. “Can only be a good thing” suggests that there is no possible opposition to these politics when its effects are seen as positive for children. The image of a child functions here, just as it did in conservative futurity politics, to shut down the conception of a politics outside of the domain of the child. Queerbaiting, therefore, operates in opposition to this linear progress, shutting down a futurity by restricting the affirming possibilities of a future for the queer child. Queerbaiting is seen as shutting down the possibility of queerness being intelligible, authentic and liveable.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I argued for space within queerbaiting to account for the potential pleasure and playfulness of queer readings in contemporary queer fandom. The overwhelming discourse surrounding queerbaiting and the investments of fans are undeniably linked to notions of pain, injury and trauma. Queerbaiting is harmful, according to fans, because it closes off possibilities of a queer future. In queerbaiting critique, the function of the media in affirming queer young people highlights an orientation towards a future that was so criticised by queer theorists such as Edelman (2004). Happiness scripts intertwined with heteronormative life narratives are seen to already close off possibilities of a future for young queer people. My interviews demonstrated that fans believe that media is a primary space for a renegotiation of these happiness scripts, of narratives of liveable adulthood. By seeing images of queer people that are not queerbaiting, fans claim that vulnerable, young queer people are able to realise their sexuality as well as work to counter homophobic and heteronormative ideas they may have internalised. I argue that media representation for young queer people affirms an orientation towards a future and is foundational for the political subjectivity of fans in contemporary queer fandom. Such subjectivity is underpinned by an impulse for intelligibility and authenticity, reinforced through representation and liveability for queer children.

Queerbaiting discourse presents interesting shifts in the mobilisation of a theory and politics of the child. By focusing on a specifically queer child, that is, a child queered by their same-sex desire and/or gender nonconformity, fans present a challenge to the notion that futurity always reinforces a heteronormative, patriarchal politic. The prevailing discourse of childhood innocence, moreover, relies on the epistemological distancing

between child and adult sexuality. This involves the relegation of sexuality in children to the realm of play or experimentation, or its dismissal altogether. By installing epistemological distance between child and adult sexualities, notions of innocence and vulnerability, and thus a need for protection, are enabled. Queerbaiting critique similarly utilises ideas of childhood innocence and vulnerability. However, it does so by specifically asserting that such innocence and vulnerability are embodied *because* of a child's queerness, not their lack of it. Yet, at the same time there is a reliance on the idea of distance between child and adult sexuality in order to protect children. Fans conceptualise the protection of children and childhood sexuality (or children's healthy growth into adult sexuality) as enacted by preventing adult intervention. In this way, the queer child is harmed because they experience adult intervention of homophobic and heteronormative ideas. Such ideas strip them of agency and power in their knowledge of possible queer adulthoods, in the ability to see and know queerness as authentic and liveable. A liberationist model of power is present here when fans position the sexuality of the queer child as intrinsic and vulnerable to the intervention of a heteronormative society and negative representation (queerbaiting). Creators of media possess power whereas queer children do not. As we have seen throughout this chapter, fans conceive of representation as a way for queers to gain power. This model of power as exterior to the inner, essential truths of sexuality presents a contradiction to earlier Foucauldian thought.

For fans, this liberationist model of power underpins their political subjectivity and animates their use of an affective politics. This was often executed through a recollection of their own childhoods and how they were queer children in need of queer media representation. I argue that this act of looking back, enabling the queer child to experience what Stockton terms a "backward birth," allows fans to mobilise affective politics through an innocent and vulnerable queer child. Such an act also inserts themselves into these politics through a collective memory.

With the internet, fans are able to unite, create, mobilise, share and criticise like they never have before. As this chapter has shown, however, the position of powerlessness is crucial for the queer political subjectivity of fans and their critique of queerbaiting. The focus and privileging of the child are looking back at a history, a collective, imagined, mythical memory. Yet, this inevitably leads to looking forward towards a hopeful future, towards a possibility of an adult happiness for the queer child. How exactly does happiness work in relation to notions of 'good' or 'positive' queer representation? Further, how does this conception of positive queer representation present reworkings of queer theory and

politics of visibility? The next chapter will focus on this orientation and how fans understand particular queer images that work in opposition to queerbaiting.

Chapter 4: Representation, Temporality and Happiness

“This is how I wish to remember them. Happy, together, and alive.”

– Elizabeth Bridges (2016)

Political investments in representation within contemporary queerbaiting discourse present unique tensions and shifts from the positive imaging debates of the 1990s. Queer political fandom conceptualises and utilises representational politics by drawing on a history of queer images on screen and evaluating contemporary media contexts of queer representation, taking into account both cultural and economic restrictions and incentives. For fans, these politics and histories are used to determine what is counted as positive or negative representation. How do such politics and histories function in this determination? The last chapter explored the figure of the child as a vehicle for affective responses to queerbaiting as well as affective politics used to criticise queerbaiting. The child represents futurity for fans and serves as a call for positive representation in order to affirm young people’s queerness with images of possible adulthoods. These potential adult futures are marked by a promise of happiness and underpinned by a desire for coherent, authentic and intelligible identities. Orientation towards a hopeful future is what provides so many fans with pleasure in their queer readings of these texts, yet it is precisely this orientation that fans argue is being exploited by queerbaiting. This chapter examines the contexts that provide the foundation for contemporary conceptions of positive representation by fans. It analyses orientation towards futurity in relation to queer temporalities between fan, text and Author, ultimately exploring the space within such representational politics for an embrace of negative affect.

Contexts of positive imaging: Stereotypes and bury your gays

What constitutes positive and negative representation within queerbaiting politics highlights a continuation of the representational debates that became highly visible in the 1990s. “It’s hard enough to find queer representation that doesn’t involve them coming out or suicide or being the villain or going through a phase or any other of the million tropes out there” (Cameron). When fans like Cameron criticise queerbaiting and other tropes as negative, bad or otherwise harmful, they are drawing on a long history of political debates around representation. These debates largely began in the 1970s and 1980s when queer and feminist movements criticised depictions of women, and gays and lesbians in film. They

argued that the ways in which groups of people are represented in media have a direct effect on their lives. As we saw in chapter one, debates around positive images of gay men became highly visible during the AIDS crisis in which they were often depicted in media as criminal and pathological. During this time, the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League, later renamed GLAAD,²⁶ was formed precisely to criticise media's handling of the AIDS crisis and its depiction of gay men. A clear goal within these debates emerged that sought to replace 'negative' images with 'positive' ones (Kagan 2018). Such terminology also references the dichotomy of people who are HIV-positive and HIV-negative: pathological and criminal versus innocent and redeemable. What constitutes positive and negative imagery has been the subject of vigorous debate amongst queer theorists. These theorists are critical of the celebration of homonormative images of gays as a 'solution' to negative depictions during the AIDS crisis. Although these debates have evolved, similar arguments are made in queerbaiting politics about the importance and impact of representation of minority groups.

The issue of 'stereotypes' was frequently referenced in my interviews with fans when they explained what constitutes negative representation of queers. Liana writes that "[t]he right bisexual representation can help fight stereotypes and biphobia" (26, bisexual). For Liana, some of the negative stereotypes that promote biphobia are bisexual characters that are "promiscuous and down to engaging sex 100% of the time." She went on to condemn the stereotyped representations of gays and lesbians that contain "butch lesbians and overly feminine gay men that never fail to comment about how a person of the same sex is physically attractive. Gay men also tend to be into fashion and/or make (often awful) statements about someone's appearance." However, it was common for fans to equate stereotypes with negative or harmful representations without delving into what those stereotypes entailed. For example, Laura writes, "[w]e have certain stereotypes that are continually portrayed in the media which can be broken with more positive representation." The stereotyped portrayals of queers in media are presented as recurring images that reinforce harmful ideas about queers (see Cover 2012a). Fans argue that these ideas can be challenged by including more diverse characters with a variety of traits not necessarily ascribed to sexual or gender identity. Hunter agrees with the importance of diversity for positive queer representation, noting that "if there's just one gay character, or just one trans character, or just one bisexual, etc. that person has to embody every experience, every trait,

²⁶ The organisation later changed to "Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation," and in 2013, simply became known as "GLAAD" to be inclusive of bisexual and transgender people.

every perspective. But if there's lots, then we can really see the diversity of those individuals." Anna echoes Hunter's sentiments and argues that this diversity can only come with the knowledge and experience of being queer. She asserts that straight/cis writers will often portray stereotypes because they lack the firsthand knowledge of what being queer is:

[straight/cis writers tend] to fall into relying on the same stereotypes and patterns that have defined mainstream LGBT media in the past. The only experience that straight/cis writers often have with queer topics comes from those previous media, or secondhand from friends or from the general ideas that society holds about queer life and people. Media tends to have a very narrow view of the queer experience when no actual queer people are involved. Like, yes, a lot of people have a hard time with being closeted and coming out. But not every LGBT person does! It would just be nice to see some more diversity in the stories being told, rather than the same stories being rehashed with different characters.

These fans present stereotyped images of queer people as negative or harmful because they are inaccurate depictions of a uniform group of people that in reality are quite diverse.

Wider debates around queer representation have also focused on stereotypes because of their inaccurate and repetitive portrayals of queer people. Richard Dyer argues that "[t]he role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit" (2002, 16). Stereotypes stamp out the diversity of the groups they are said to represent. The stereotype of the promiscuous bisexual, the effeminate gay man, the butch lesbian, are all negative representations, according to these critics, because they serve to eradicate diversity in an attempt to clearly make them distinct from heterosexuals. However, this criticism also implies that the actual traits attached to queer people in these stereotypes are themselves negative. It suggests that the stereotype of the promiscuous bisexual is harmful not just because it ignores other characteristics of bisexual people, but because the trait of promiscuity is seen as an inherently negative attribute that encourages biphobia. The problem with focusing on stereotypes when criticising or condemning negative representation of queer people is that it leads to a prioritising of certain characteristics or traits of queer people over others. Of course, a diversity of queer people in media is necessary and positive; however, these criticisms of the butch lesbian, the effeminate gay man or the promiscuous bisexual imply that those traits are negative and portray the community in a negative light. This proves to be particularly problematic when queer

viewers identify with these traits. It is always concerning when the condemnation of particular characteristics in queer people mirrors the condemnation they receive from heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies, relations and systems. One fan, DW, did in fact present an alternative view of the stereotype of the butch lesbian. While she similarly criticised ‘stereotyped’ portrayals, she was in fact critical of the *lack* of butch lesbians on her screen, particularly in the television show *The Good Fight* (2017–present). “Networks are afraid to play into the ‘stereotype’ of gay women,” she writes, “because it isn’t appealing to straight men. That’s why 99% of lesbians on tv and in film are ‘femme.’ Where, if you didn’t see them engaging with another [woman] romantically, you could forget that they’re gay.” Fans are still criticising what they perceive to be stereotyped images of queers, just as critics did during the debates that began in the 1970s. Fans believe that a diversity of queer stories and characters are the remedy to stereotypical imagery.

Whilst stereotypes were a key theme in my interviews with fans, when it came to more specific criticisms of queerbaiting, the practice of killing queer characters on television elicited the greatest emotional responses. As explored in chapter one, the critique of the trope “bury your gays” suggests that the prevalence of LGBTQ characters being killed in film and television is a way to “punish” them, or for networks and creators to avoid being seen as condoning homosexuality (see Russo 1987). The term “dead lesbian syndrome” was originally used due to the higher number of queer women killed. Despite the term “gays”, potentially excluding queer people who are not gay or lesbian, “bury your gays” is more commonly used now to include gay male, bisexual and transgender characters (*TV Tropes* 2018). The trope of killing or punishing LGBTQ characters is often linked to the historical censorship of explicitly depicting or endorsing “perverse acts” in literature and on screen in Great Britain and the United States (Russo 1987; Hulan 2017). Killing or punishing gays and lesbians in media was one method to circumvent censors, allowing for their inclusion. However, once censorship—both formal and informal—began to wane, use of the trope was criticised by queer audiences. As Haley Hulan writes, “[the trope] originated as a tool for queer authors to write queer narratives without facing negative consequences associated with the ‘endorsement’ of homosexuality. Then, as social climates in the west [*sic*] changed to become more accepting of LGBTQ+ people and identities, Bury Your Gays as a refuge for queer authors and audiences fell into obsolescence” (2017, 24). It is the shift in perception of the political, industrial and financial restrictions on media creators that has led to many queer viewers believing that no such censors exist anymore (or at least not nearly to the same extent). The killing of

LGBTQ characters is now seen as a negative and harmful practice, rather than a way to have any representation at all. As lesbian fan Sammy says, the BYG trope reflects the idea that “queer people somehow don’t deserve happy endings.”

BYG gained recent attention after the character Lexa was killed in the television show *The 100*. Her death came after fans were led to believe that she and the series protagonist, Clarke, were going to receive a happy ending. However, after the two had sex for the first time—a scene that was frequently advertised by the show leading up to the episode—Lexa was killed. Her death sparked a huge backlash from audiences. The outrage was exacerbated by the fact that fans were assured that she would not be killed even though the actor had to leave the show due to other work commitments (Stanfill 2019, 2). In response, a large number of media outlets published articles tallying the number of queer people (especially women) killed in television (McConnaughy 2016; Riese 2016; Sargent 2016; Snarker 2016; Dibdin 2017; Shakeri 2017). Fans tweeted after the episode with “Bury Your Tropes Not Us,” making the hashtag trend nationally (Stanfill 2019, 1). Many fans were outraged at what they perceived to be the most insidious form of queerbaiting. For example, one participant Anna believes that queerbaiting in *The 100* with explicitly queer characters is more harmful than queerbaiting in *Supergirl* in which the characters are supposedly heterosexual:

I think what happened with Clexa [Clarke/Lexa] was worse. They built it up and gave us so much hope, that it was so incredibly shocking and so hurtful when Lexa died. There was a lot more emotional investment in an actual canon relationship, and we finally felt understood before we had the rug ripped out from under us ... I do think that *Supergirl*’s queerbaiting is damaging in its own way, just not perhaps with the same potential for emotional devastation as Clexa.

Rather than only referring to media creators baiting audiences with the false promise of queerness, Anna clarifies why queerbaiting is still an appropriate term to criticise this practice when the characters are explicitly queer:

Queerbaiting is when media, usually television shows, either implicitly or explicitly hint at same-sex relationships, but never actually realise them, but it can also be extended to refer to the wilful courting of an LGBT audience with the actual depiction of a same-sex relationship, only to kill the characters or relationship shortly thereafter. In this form, I believe it to be even more dangerous, as there will generally be more LGBT viewers who are much more invested in the relationship, so they stand to be hurt even more than if there were no ‘canon’ relationship to begin with. This is what *The 100* did: they openly and actively engaged and promised representation to

their LGBT audience, mainly on Twitter, all while knowing there was no happy ending for the characters.

The evolution or “conceptual motility” (Ng 2017) of the term “queerbaiting” Anna describes helps to account for the ways in which queerbaiting accusations arise with explicitly queer characters. Eve Ng argues that “[t]he particular development of queerbaiting is due to changes in the (para)texts that are read intertextually, and the queer contextuality of when they are read” (2017, 9.1). She asserts that the term queerbaiting should not be limited to describing media texts that fail to explicitly represent queer characters when the possibility of such is demonstrated through textual and paratextual content. Ng proposes an alternative view to account for the term’s use to criticise shows with canonically queer characters. The crucial element of queerbaiting, Ng argues, is “not the lack of canonicity, but how satisfactorily queerness plays out in the canonical text relative to viewer expectations that emerge from the reading of multiple texts and paratexts and that take account of queer contextuality” (2017, 2.8). This model provides a solid explanation for variances in queer subtext and queerbaiting amongst the reception of audiences. The BYG trope is criticised because of the conceptual motility and evolution of the term queerbaiting. Queerbaiting discourse, as evidenced in my interviews, is inextricably tied to contemporary expectations of queer representation. These expectations are informed through paratextual and textual content as Ng describes; however, they are also tied to what fans believe is ‘positive’ representation.

The notion of a ‘happy ending’ is at the heart of the criticisms of the BYG trope and what fans deemed to be ‘positive’ representation of queers. Whilst the example of Lexa in *The 100* was the most notable reference for fans, the importance of a happy ending was demonstrated in general representational politics:

I know that not everything in real life is happy endings, but it seems that in the media, queer characters and couples very rarely get happy endings. There’s usually death or break ups, or characters realising they’re not really gay, or even the characters just moving on from same-sex relationships into heterosexual endgames ... It would be nice to see normalised, happy same-sex couples in the media rather than it always being about the difficulties of being LGBT+ (which are of course important, but gay people can be happy too!). (Anna)

Happiness is fundamental for fans in their conceptions of positive or negative representation. It is also the foundation for queerbaiting critique when the representation does not meet the expectations of audiences, as in the case of *The 100*. How are fans

understanding notions of happiness? How does this investment in positive affect impact the way they approach queerbaiting texts and rework contemporary queer politics?

Happiness

The harm that fans say was caused by the queerbaiting of Lexa in *The 100* goes further than the simple broken promise of queer representation. Happiness serves a significant function within criticisms of the BYG trope and how it is linked to queerbaiting. As Miles asks, “[i]f you look at queer film[s]/tv show[s], how many of them are of queer people living their lives being happy? Most media involve[s] queer suffering.” However, it is not just denial of happiness for queers that devastated fans of Clarke and Lexa: it was that Lexa was killed. Bridges’ (2016) blog post about Lexa’s death, providing the epigraph for this chapter, captures the pain experienced by many queer fans:

And I, along with our entire fandom, was tipped into desolation. This was not just a character dying. This was not just the end of a beautifully developed same-sex relationship unlike any other we had seen onscreen. It was the death of our hope. It was the death of our hope for ever feeling like we matter, like we are equal participants in this world. Despite whatever ‘progress’ happens, people still hate us. Despite things like the marriage decision – which, frankly, will probably get reversed sometime – this was the assurance of what we have always suspected, always known in fact: We live in a culture that hates us and believes we deserve to die because of who we love. And make no mistake, Lexa was shot precisely because she loved Clarke, whatever context you might try to place around it.

Happiness for Bridges and many fans is inherently political. For them, it is happiness that has been denied to queers in their real lives and negative media representation reflects and reinforces that fact. As Liana said in her interview, “I feel like [queerbaiting and the BYG trope is] quite a parallel to the LGBTQ+ community: we are often made invisible or literally killed because of our sexualities.” Again, the parallel Liana is referring to highlights the political element of positive imaging debates. The central tenet underlying those debates and contemporary critique is that the way minority groups are represented in media has a significant impact on their lives. By mirroring what queer people experience in real life, that is, invisibility and death, Liana illustrates the political orientations that happiness has for contemporary fans.

Happiness is now orienting fans towards certain texts over others. For instance, one fan draws on the history of censorship to assert why the continuation of the trope is

unnecessary and harmful. In response to being asked why it is important for them that gay characters do not die, Sarah replies

... because I'm a lesbian and I want to have hope. There's so much pain involved in being a lesbian and learning that about yourself ... it's just ... hard and sometimes it feels like the world is against you. So when gay characters die I feel it like a physical blow ... due to censorship there's a long history of queer characters being forced to either be subtextual OR to die/be punished by the narrative. So that needs to stop now, and I want to see happy gay characters forevermore. I don't mind when bad things happen to them if that's the kind of world they're living in. But in the end they should be happy and they should be together. Gay characters shouldn't have to be closeted/subtextual or alone or dead because I don't want to be any of those things either.

Rather than risk being hurt again by queerbaiting and/or queer characters being killed, some fans will now only become invested in a text if they already know that the characters are queer and will not die. It is clear that the liveability of queers on screen is intimately tied to discourses of happiness.

Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests that happiness is not innately caused by certain objects, but that certain objects are discursively produced as causing happiness or unhappiness, orienting us towards or away from them. In this way, queer representational politics are grounded in orientations towards happiness. Ahmed provides a phenomenological analysis of how happiness affects the way different bodies inhabit spaces and how we understand the world and our place within it. Sarah, along with many other fans, is similarly oriented towards or away from certain textual objects they understand as causing happiness or unhappiness. Ahmed contends that happiness is not a positive affect that flows freely between objects, but rather a “promise” that is passed around and sticks to objects. Such objects may include heteronormative ideals and systems such as marriage, reproduction, monogamy and domesticity. Those that oppose or appear to challenge these ideals are thus seen as causes of unhappiness that threaten the social order. The conception of happiness articulated by fans reflects this. Their knowledge of certain textual objects that cause happiness or unhappiness is informed by their previous experience with queerbaiting, and paratextual and textual content.

As previously stated, happiness is about an orientation towards the future for fans. Kagan (2018) writes that this orientation underpinned much of the positive imagery during the 1990s in the wake of the “crisis” era of AIDS. “1990s positive imagery,” Kagan claims, “was motivated by the impulse to orient itself toward the future, which meant that representations of gay life worked anxiously and fastidiously to shake off its associations

with death, meaninglessness, melancholy and the other negative feelings associated with the experience of AIDS” (202). Images of gays during the AIDS crisis were associated with death, disease, pathology and criminality. In an effort to render homosexuality more palatable and to ‘remedy’ these negative affects, images of gays in media were predominantly about a happiness that orients them towards the future, leaving behind a painful past.

By orienting queers towards objects and ideals deemed to cause happiness, such as domesticity, marriage, capitalism, patriotism and consumerism, a neoliberal ideological agenda is enacted. This agenda has been highly criticised by queer theorists. Within homonormative politics, one of the functions of happiness is to placate the queer, to neuter them in their presentation as complacent (and therefore complicit) in hegemonic structures. Whilst assimilating and upholding heteronormative institutions and structures, homonormative politics present queers as happy in their participation and inclusion. As Heather Love writes, “[i]n the era of gay normalization, gays and lesbians not only have to be like everyone else (get married, raise kids, mow the grass, etc.), they have to look and feel good doing it” (2008, 54). Happiness makes queers more palatable and therefore grants them increased visibility as consumer subjects and apolitical characters in media (Sender 1999; Becker 2006). How might we critically interrogate this drive for happiness?

Critical interrogations of happiness and its entanglement with homonormativity presents a tension between queer theory and political practice. Mainstream gay rights movements in the 1990s seemed to be acting in opposition to queer academic theorising that sought to undermine, challenge and resist normalisation and identity politics. The historical precedents of these tensions are encapsulated in the constructionism versus essentialism debates. Constructionists have stressed that sexuality and identities are discursively produced whereas essentialists have asserted the biological forces behind sexuality (see Epstein 1987; Duggan 1995). The tension or conflict between these factions highlights a wider (epistemological and methodological) distance between theory and politics. During these debates in the 1990s and early 2000s, a common criticism levelled at queer academics was the lack of political saliency of their ideas when faced with right-wing, conservative, religious opposition to queer rights (Duggan 1995). What use, critics have argued, is a deconstructionist view of identity when conservative oppositions aimed to convert or eradicate queer people? What place is there for these criticisms of happiness when fans argue they have been harmed by negative representation? These questions speak to the practice of fans evaluating positive representation through the rubric of happiness

and the implications for their relationship with queerness and texts. Such implications will be explored in the following sections.

Queer temporality

Although an orientation towards the future is foundational to contemporary representational politics, queerbaiting presents an undermining of normative, linear, temporal logics. Futurity is significant for fans in their evaluation of ‘positive’ representation as well as a remedy to the pain they have experienced in their real lives and from previous negative representation. However, within their queer readings, crossings between past, present and future exist that undermine normative logics of time. What makes these temporal crossings significant, as opposed to anyone’s experience of memory, is the unique standpoint of queer viewers. Feminist standpoint theory highlights the “double vision” experienced by marginalised people (Hartsock 1987; Flax 1995). Such theory argues that those who are oppressed by structures, institutions, relations, systems and ideologies are positioned at a unique vantage point that allows (and compels) them to see themselves as others do. As such, those that are not oppressed by these forces are usually not compelled to reflect on their positioning or their Otherness. The unique standpoint of queer viewers has been discussed throughout this thesis. What is clear from my interviews with fans is that in relation to queer imagery, this vantage point is marked by a history of trauma, whether real or actualised, personal or abstract. Of course, these distinctions cannot be made with confidence. The trauma both explicitly and implicitly mentioned in my interviews related to their own personal tales of suffering because of heteronormativity and queerphobia. However, trauma also referred to wider systems of erasure, censorship and punishment of queers in society, politics, on screen and in popular culture. This history of trauma positions contemporary queer fans at a vantage point that has allowed queerbaiting to proliferate through their ability and desire to see queerness in media. What flows from this, I argue, are unique temporal crossings rooted in trauma.

The positive and negative affects that fans mobilise present temporal crossings driven by notions of happiness. In her essay “The Queer Temporalities of Queerbaiting,” Evangeline Aguas (2019) asserts that fans engage in temporal crossings between past, present and future through the strategies and practices of queer reading. Made of textual and paratextual content, queer readings within queerbaiting discourse involve looking back

at past content and context to determine the existence or meaning of the queerness in the present. These readings are then used to determine queer futures:

As fans appropriate queer readings of texts, they also draw on varied paratextual sources such as studio marketing and their past experiences as viewers. It is through this intertextuality that I locate a sense of movement between not only texts and sources but also histories. Within these movements, it is interesting to reflect on the queer temporalities of fan experience—how the fans’ interpretive strategies speak to the dislocation and warping of time. I find that, while negotiating queer readings and producer motivations in increasingly complex ways, the fans perform temporal crossings between *past*, *present* and *future*. (Aguas 2019, 57)

Normative linear time is tied to heteronormative institutions and narratives of happiness bound to marriage and reproduction (see Freeman 2010; Goltz 2010). Aguas draws on queer critiques of these temporalities to suggest that the experience of queer fans is marked “not only by a lingering in the past, but also a pull towards the future” (2019, 59). Heather Love echoes this in her book *Feeling Backward*:

Queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past? Such divided allegiances result in contradictory feelings: pride and shame, anticipation and regret, hope and despair. Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward.’ (2009, 27)

José Esteban Muñoz also theorises a futurity that is queered, declaring that “the future is queerness’s domain” (2009, 1). These queer theorists suggest that queerness presents temporal crossings, confusion and delay, ultimately disrupting a heteronormative logic of temporality and futurity. Within contemporary queerbaiting discourse, queer temporality in fan readings is founded on an affective pull between past, present and future. This pull is driven by the promise of happiness. I argue that it is their drive and vantage point framed by a history of trauma that underpins the political mobilisation of fans.

When a queerbaiting moment is named, fans mourn the loss of the queer future they had hoped for and believed was promised. BBC’s *Sherlock* presents the clearest example. Many fans, after evaluating textual and paratextual content to then presume that Sherlock would profess his love for John in season four, were left to believe that all of their ‘evidence’ was in fact queerbait. After this moment, fans accused the creators of employing “queerbaiting that denies Sherlock and John a happy ending” (Wojton and Porter 2018, 13). After analysing queer media contexts that surround *Sherlock*, fans engaged in temporal crossings of looking back at clues and looking forward to predict and hope. “Queer

contextuality” (Ng 2017) is tied to the history (or perceived history) of censorship and constraints on the production of queer images in film and television. When fans engage in an evaluation of queer contextuality in order to determine and predict the production of queer meaning in the present and future, they draw on this historical context as well as their personal attachments to queer imagery. Here, I observe an entanglement of the personal and historical in the relations of fans to texts.

When season four aired and many fans in the community realised that the pairing of Sherlock and John would not become canon, they were left feeling disoriented, betrayed and deeply hurt. One fan, Sarah, described themselves as feeling “old” when they realised that they had been queerbaited. When asked why they felt “old,” they wrote:

Because the world made sense. It made sense that I was seeing gay things written by a gay man and then there would be kissing. It was neat and tidy and it felt so good. But after that ... I just felt ... I was never going to trust like that again.

Queerbaiting promises queer representation. With this promise it encourages audiences to look forward towards a hopeful future of queerness through signs in the present that gain meaning from past signs and context. Every moment of implied or subtextual queerness serves as a beacon of hope, a sign of what is to come. Sarah describes this feeling of hope as “the world made sense” and “trusting what I was seeing in front of me.” When this promise is broken, fans become disoriented, questioning each sign they thought they had received. Miles wrote that they “had to mourn the show.” Fans mourn the loss of what could have been, they mourn the loss of hope for a happy future or a happy ending. As discussed in the previous chapter, images of queers on screen serve as signifiers of possible, imagined, and knowable (happy) futures. This futurity, I argue, illustrates the impulse of fans for a coherent, intelligible, authentic queer identity: an identity shored up in the liveability of queer lives on screen. Queerbaiting is seen as opposing this liveability.

The looking forward of fans in their politicisation of queer representation is usually framed around escape from a painful past or present. For Miles, this pain was what attracted them to Sherlock and John and helped Miles “get through” it. “I was down and blue just like they were,” Miles explains, “and the possibility that they could be together and be happy was a very comforting thought. It still is. It’s also important to mention that seeing them together would be a message equivalent to ‘being queer and being happy are possible.’” Miles’ affective response to queerbaiting highlights the wider political evaluation of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ representation that many fans practise. In this assessment, Miles reflects on their personal response to representation whilst ultimately

asserting the effect that visibility can have on society. For fans, positive queer representation not only provides them with affirmation and hope, but they also conceptualise this effect as existing for other viewers and wider society. Laura commented on her experience of viewing queers in media as a young gay teenager, stating that she settled for any sort of visibility in order to look towards a hopeful future:

As a young gay teenager, I was filled with a lot of self hatred and the feeling that I wasn't normal, because all I saw on the tv or heard in songs were about boys and girls falling for each other ... So without realising it I was being taught that my future would either end up with me loving a man, or end up with me or the girl I loved dying ... So I clung to what little I had on the tv at the time—glimpses of love between Faith and *Buffy*, a ridiculous storyline on *Coronation Street* (Britain's version of *[N]eighbours*), Maureen and Joanne from *RENT*, because it gave me a glimmer of hope that who I was was okay.

Laura settled for subtextual queerness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and a “ridiculous storyline” in *Coronation Street* (1960–present) because she believed there was a lack of explicit, positive queer representation at the time. Laura wanted to see herself represented in order to gain affirmation and access to a hopeful, happy, queer future. So strong is this impulse for intelligibility and authenticity that she settled for a representation criticised in contemporary political discourse.

As part of the temporal crossings within queerbaiting, fans are confronted with pain from the past whilst attempting to escape it. Positive queer representation may remedy the pain of fans in their looking forward towards a hopeful, happy, better future; however, it is when this representation is negative, particularly when representation destroys hope as in the case of queerbaiting, that the pain from the past creeps back in. Pain takes the place of this looking forward that previously provided fans with pleasure and a remedy. Goltz et al. write that “the past is never past, but sits with us, beckons to us, bleeds through the canvas, and speaks through the spaces in between” (2015, 11). For fans, queerbaiting explicitly highlights this notion through a broken promise, a destroyed hope. Bridges writes in her blog post, following Lexa's death, that “[s]ince Thursday's episode I've been bombarded relentlessly by unbidden memories of every hurt that has ever stung me for being gay, every death or loss I've ever felt in my life. I have been plagued by feelings of hopelessness, and yes even suicidal thoughts” (2016). The past bleeds into the present, it bombards through forced confrontations with trauma. The death of Lexa was the death of the future that fans had hoped for, confronting them with the pain they were attempting to escape. Bridges' experience of this past may be personal, but it is also entangled with the historical.

The pain that marks queer history is what persists in the present, as Love suggests when she says that queers “face the odd situation of looking forward while we are feeling backward” (2009, 27). Fans experience the negative affect and dark history of queers as it is forcibly drawn into the present by queerbaiting.

However, in the face of this negative affect, of this chaotic and, for many, harmful temporal crossing of the past into the present, some fans attempted to assert power over textual meaning and to remedy the harms of queerbaiting. Bridges’ blog post contained an image of Clarke and Lexa in bed after the two had had sex for the first time in a loving embrace before Lexa was killed. The caption to the image reads: “This is how I wish to remember them. Happy, together, and alive”. Many fans in fact stopped watching their shows after the broken promise of queerbaiting and the death of their hope for a future where queers were happy, together and alive. Some fans stopped watching to send a message to creators that queerbaiting is insidious and harmful, others to protect themselves from further pain. By choosing instead to focus on the times when this hope for a happy future was alive, I argue that fans are attempting to take control of this affective temporal pull. In looking forward to escape the pain of the past, fans attempt to regain power over the queer meaning from creators.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, fans rely on notions of intentionality in order to criticise queerbaiting. What I observe in the times when there is a defining moment of queerbaiting in the text, that is, a clear moment when fans suddenly believe that all of their queer readings have in fact been evidence of queerbaiting, fans attempt to regain power and agency over textual meaning. They may boycott the show, choose to remember the characters before the death of their hope, or maintain hope that this future will be achieved through other media that is not controlled by creators that queerbait. Through these actions, fans exercise a level of agency previously discarded in queerbaiting politics. Fans position themselves as without agency, control or power over queer meaning in order to lay blame on creators. However, I argue that in specific moments of queerbaiting in which the hope for a happy, queer future is no longer possible, fans attempt to regain this agency. The affective temporal pull that permeates throughout queerbaiting is repositioned by fans in these actions. There is a contrast in the dynamics of power and the ways fans conceptualise and attempt to gain agency between the moments of queerbaiting that are prolonged, subtle, and nuanced, and the moments in which queerbaiting becomes immediately apparent. However, there is still a futurity that permeates the political subjectivity of fans, their queerbaiting critique and their evaluations of positive or negative

representation. What space is there within contemporary queer political fandom for an embrace of negative affect that does not seek to escape a painful past or indeed look towards a hopeful future? Is there a conflict between this form of queer negativity and contemporary queerbaiting politics?

Embracing negative affects

Happiness, as we have seen, plays a crucial role in the formation, evaluation and conceptualisation of what is deemed positive queer representation in queerbaiting discourse. Bridges' blog post clearly demonstrates this in her enjoyment of queerness in *The 100* before queerbaiting:

So no, it was not just a show. It represented far more than that. It represented a better world, a world where we are treated equally – not in a fictional future, but today. A world where we love who we love and don't get condemned or punished for it. But that dream got snatched away from us. Again. And I don't know if I'll live to see that world. Maybe. Someday. But that day is not today.

As I have explained, happiness for fans is manifested in an orientation towards the future. Bridges' unhappiness is thus entangled with perceived loss of her ability to envision a future where queers are happy. Happiness is inextricably bound to institutions that direct us towards a heteronormative life, ultimately shaping bodies to fit into this world. Queer theory resists this impulse and, in many of its renditions, aims to resist promises of happiness. It steadfastly refuses to orient and shape queer bodies to fit into heteronormative institutions, ultimately challenging normative temporality. "Queer time" opposes these narratives of growth. Stockton writes:

Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity. (quoted in Dinshaw et al. 2006, 182)

In critiquing these heteronormative discourses of temporality, growth, orientation and happiness, Ahmed similarly calls for unhappiness to be a marker and practice of refusals and challenges rather than personal failures to achieve happiness. Unhappiness and negative affects are, for queer theorists, political critiques rather than individual failures.

The queerness of temporal crossings explored in the previous section, however, should not be wholly celebrated as subversive transgressions of normative linear time. Whilst the notion of “queer time” does aim to explore the potential for queerness to exist outside of the domain of heteronormative conceptions of time and what is mandated or promised to provide for a happy life, the investments of fans in a happy future does draw on progressivist politics. As previously explored, temporal crossings in which fans engage highlight a unique vantage point marked by trauma. However, they do not supersede the investments in progressivist politics as they utilise and prioritise a happy futurity intertwined with linear notions of social and historical change.

Despite the call to embrace negativity in queer theory, there is a clear distancing from negative affect within queerbaiting politics. The only exception I observe is when fans deploy negative affect in response to queerbaiting’s perceived harms. Fans cling to a future that promises positive affects. This future promises an intelligible, liveable, authentic queer identity. Fans are not only oriented towards objects and ideals thought to cause happiness, but they use this orientation to evaluate and critique queer representation. The mainstream gay rights movement has relied on this distancing of negative affect in the construction and use of a history of gay oppression. Love (2009) suggests that a history of pain, trauma and victimhood is relied upon in order to look towards a hopeful future and justify certain political actions in the present. John D’Emilio, moreover, suggests this history is so necessary and pervasive for mainstream gay rights movements that they “invented a mythology” (1983b, 131). He argues that in the 1960s, gay men and lesbians had no explicit, visible history to draw upon in the building of their movement, so they invented a mythical history that relied on present personal experiences that were “read backward in time” (132). As I explored in chapter three, this practice is still prevalent when older generations interpret and construct the experience of younger LGBTQ people through their own personal experience (Bohan et al. 2002). This ‘mythical history’ that D’Emilio writes about involved the construction of gays and lesbians throughout history as closeted, shamed, isolated, and not naming or understanding their sexuality:

... because we faced so many oppressive laws, public policies, and cultural beliefs, we projected this into an image of the abysmal past: until gay liberation, lesbians and gay men were always the victims of systematic, undifferentiated, terrible oppression. These myths have limited our political perspective. They have contributed, for instance, to an overreliance on a strategy of coming out—if every gay man and lesbian in America came out, gay oppression would end—and have allowed us to ignore the institutionalized ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are reproduced. They have encouraged, at times, an incapacitating despair, especially at

moments like the present: How can we unravel a gay oppression so pervasive and unchanging? (1983b, 132)

My interviews reflected these politics that rely upon a history of oppression and the prioritisation of coming out. For example, when asked why she thinks there are greater numbers of openly queer characters in media now, DW replies:

I think we can thank the movement Harvey Milk started in the [19]70's. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." The queer community has gotten outter, louder and become unapologetic. We demand to be seen. There are a LOT of queer folk in the entertainment industry, and as a result general access to the platform is easier. HOWEVER, the culture at large has been slower to accept. But the more of us who come out and normalize our lives. The more its made difficult to impossible for ANYONE to say they've never met or known a queer person.

Understanding visibility and coming out as enabling social or cultural legitimacy, acceptance, or the ending of heterosexism and heteronormative institutions relies on a temporal crossing between a mythical past and a hopeful future. DW, like many fans within queerbaiting debates, looks back to a past politics of gay rights and uses this to evaluate political possibilities for the future shored up in representation.

The reliance on a history of pain, trauma and negative affect for contemporary political discourse becomes problematic, I argue, when such discourse is founded on identity. Identity politics stakes its claim for political recognition and justice on the basis of identity categories. However, when such identity categories are discursively produced through discourses of power rooted in a history of suffering—a history so crucial to politics—a tension emerges. This tension is between the need to simultaneously embrace and forget such trauma. In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown asks,

where do the historically and culturally specific elements of politicized identity's investments in itself, and especially in its own history of suffering, come into conflict with the need to give up these investments, to engage in something of a Nietzschean 'forgetting' of this history, in the pursuit of an emancipatory democratic project? (1995b, 202)

Love (2009) takes up this question when she analyses the attachments of contemporary queers to a dark history and their impulse to *use* this history for 'good' political agency. Instead, she calls for queer critical politics rooted in a "backward future" (147). She advocates for a politics that both orients itself towards the future whilst embracing the past. For Love, negative affects are not distanced, erased or remedied, but they are embraced,

even those that seem to be ‘bad’ for contemporary politics. This results in political subjectivity “forged in the image of exile, of refusal, even of failure” (71).

The deep investment of fans and contemporary queers in images of happiness is certainly understandable. What would happen, however, if we were not so quick in seeking to overcome negativity and instead embraced the darkness, the negative affects that are ‘bad’ for politics? Ahmed explains that her deconstruction and criticism of the political forces of positive affects does not obligate us to be ‘unhappy,’ but rather, that unhappiness should be conceived as more than just a “feeling that should be overcome” (2010, 217). The drive for happiness stifles emancipatory and revolutionary politics (see Berlant 2011). Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) delves into this refusal of positive affect. Instead, he calls for an embrace of failure. If contemporary neoliberal politics positions success as the ultimate way of being and moving in the world, what space can failure occupy for alternative and queer ways of being and moving? The queer art of failure for Halberstam “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). The model of success rooted in heteronormative and capitalistic institutions and norms is a punishing impulse for queerness. The notion of queerness as a refusal of this model lends itself to possibilities of embracing negative affects of unhappiness, delay and failure. Halberstam looks at the “silly archive” of animated animals, robots and toys in media to deconstruct ideas of selfhood. In this deconstruction, he observes how losing, failing and forgetting can dismantle our understandings of success as they are grounded in ways of knowing and being. Queerness itself is a failure within this model of neoliberal success. However, Halberstam suggests a drive to fail ‘better’ may create other queer ways of being that can present alternatives to building community, knowledge and art.

The political call for an embrace of negative affect as a mode of disruption and refusal presents queerness as inevitably tied to melancholia, shame and the death-drive. Michael Snediker (2009) criticises this attachment in queer theory and instead calls for a turn to “queer optimism.” Critiquing the works of Butler, Edelman, Sedgwick and Bersani, Snediker argues that a vocabulary has emerged in which queer sexuality becomes equated with pessimistic concepts. Such concepts, he asserts, rigidly construct an epistemological distance and thus, lack of any analytic engagement with positive affect. Whilst he acknowledges the usefulness of deconstruction of identity as the site of normalisation, he

suggests that the call for incoherency and destabilisation of the self is not as helpful for contemporary subjectivity or political agency:

Dissatisfaction with a given regime of coherence [such as heteronormativity] might sponsor a critical commitment to dismantling coherence *tout court*. Such a dissatisfaction, however, might likewise productively sponsor a reconfiguration of coherence—the cultivation of a vocabulary of coherence that more precisely does justice to the ways in which coherence isn't expansively, unilaterally destructive, reductive, or ideological. (2009, 25–26)

He does not equate queer optimism with any heteronormative futurity or temporality, however, as such optimism is not necessarily guided by orientation towards the future. Yet, interventions by fans within queerbaiting discourse beg the question of whether it is always bad to look towards the future. Muñoz (2009) theorises queerness as always out of reach, just beyond the horizon. For Muñoz, queerness allows us to develop an idealism “that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). Hope for Muñoz is central for queerness. It does not represent a heteronormative, neoliberal model of success that orients us towards institutions and norms that promise happiness. Rather, queerness, as an unattainable potentiality, is the model upon which we derive hope and orientation towards the horizon. As we have seen in this chapter, fans look towards the future to escape the pain of exploitation, of lost hope. They look towards the future to attain a knowable and liveable queerness. If we take Snediker’s call for optimism and Muñoz’s positioning of queerness as always already on the horizon, then perhaps the attachments to queerness for fans can serve not as a political identity or a history of censorship and punishment, but as hope. This hope is both a critical affect and a methodology, not always a heteronormative futurity.

Conclusion

A certain strain of queer theory calls for an embrace of failure and negative affects to challenge heteronormative and capitalistic orientations, temporalities, and models of success. Orientations towards the future within queer fandom therefore pose a problem for this embrace. When faced with a history of censorship and punishment on screen, contemporary queer fans want affirmation and explicit, happy queer characters as an alternative and remedy. This presents a problem, however, when such imagery risks reinforcing heteronormative models of success and temporality. By mobilising this dark

history as a demonstration of the success of liberal politics of visibility—to show ‘how far we’ve come’—queer fans reproduce an identity politics that necessitates both an embracing and forgetting of this history. Halberstam highlights the character Dory from the animated film *Finding Nemo* (2003) as a particularly useful example of the queer practice of forgetting. *Finding Nemo* follows clownfish Marlin on his quest to find his son and along the way encounters a regal blue tang fish named Dory who suffers from memory loss. While Dory cannot remember her family and her home, and may forget the beginning of a conversation by its end, she nevertheless accompanies Marlin on his quest. Despite this failure of memory loss, she is able to build relationships that traverse normative categories, such as befriending a predator shark. Dory’s ability to forget the harm that has been caused to her kind by sharks presents a queer model for traversing normative boundaries of communities, relationships and of being. Fans within contemporary queer political fandom would also like to forget the harms caused by queerbaiting in order to enjoy queer media. The epigraph of this chapter is worth revisiting: “this is how I choose to remember them.” Bridges here is attempting to redress or erase the painful memory of Lexa’s death. So hurtful is this memory that another fan, Sarah, said that they could no longer enjoy the form of queer representation that provided them pleasure in the past. Queer characters could no longer experience any build up or pleasurable or playful subtext. For Sarah, this history of pain has driven them only to consume queer media that meets their standards of explicitness.

Yet, this memory of pain (and/or its performative mobilisation) is crucial for the political subjectivity of fans. Fans continually draw upon a history of censorship and punishment of queers on screen to point to the harms of queerbaiting. As I have argued, these criticisms and politics of victimhood are based in identity categories: the powerless young queer fan versus the powerful, heterosexual, adult creator. A problem emerges, however, in the imperative to ‘forget’ the discourses of power through which identities are constructed whilst utilising the political saliency of such identities. Fans are caught in a temporal trap. They engage in temporal crossings through their queer readings, evaluations, predictions and subsequent criticisms of queerbaiting. Such crossings look back at a history of censorship and punishment whilst orienting them towards a hopeful future: a future driven by the impulse for a queer identity that is intelligible, liveable and authentic.

Whilst queerness may, as Muñoz (2009) suggests, be always on the horizon, always oriented towards a future that is just out of reach, contemporary queerbaiting discourse poses various problems in this orientation. For Muñoz and Snediker (2009), there is space

within queerness for hope, optimism, and a subjectivity and theory that is not rooted only in negative affect. I concur that futurity and queerness need not be mutually exclusive in order to not reproduce and reinforce heteronormativity. I also see space within this futurity for hope and optimism. It is here that ideals of happiness and possibility are entrenched, countering the negative affects of death and melancholy within the bury your gays trope. However, within contemporary queer political fandom, I observe that this hope and optimism provides a site of tension for fans in representational politics. The queerness within queerbaiting may indeed always be on the horizon, always out of reach; however, it is precisely this orientation towards grasping and knowing queerness that provides pleasure for fans in their hopeful queer readings. Yet, my interviews demonstrated that this orientation is how fans believe they are being exploited and harmed.

Why then are fans oriented towards media that queerbaits? With the awareness that they have of the practice of queerbaiting, why do they continue to be ‘baited’? One of the central criticisms of queerbaiting is that with the waning of formal and informal restrictions on explicit depictions of queer characters and narratives on screen, creators have no reason to keep queerness in the realms of the subtextual besides exploitation and/or homophobia. No longer faced with the threat of boycotts or cancellation, fans believe that creators not only face no restrictions but have a responsibility to (positively) represent queer characters. With this portrayal of the current political economy of media production and contemporary representational politics, why not, as Sarah has now sworn to do, only consume media that has explicit queer characters from the outset? The next chapter of this thesis will take up these questions and explore the political orientations that underpin the very queerness within queerbaiting texts that draws fans in, that ‘baits’ them.

Chapter 5: The Centre of the Story

Chapters three and four explored the deep entanglement of queerbaiting discourse with notions of trauma. Fans mobilise around negative affect in their critique of queerbaiting, emphasising the profound harm they perceive is caused by negative representation. This chapter will explore why fans are drawn to texts that queerbait in light of this sense of trauma, and their claims that positive queer representation is possible and actually exists in other shows. What drives and pulls fans to certain characters and stories that queerbait, rather than manifestly queer texts? What are the implications of this push-and-pull dynamic for concepts of queerness and representational politics? This chapter examines the function of centrality in these dynamics. By analysing the responses of participants and the wider phenomenon of ‘celebrity queerbaiting,’ I argue that what ultimately underpins the drive of fans towards certain ‘queerbaiting’ texts is a desire to see, know, and celebrate queerness at the centre of meaning, narrative and culture. Within such a centre, I suggest, is a deep entanglement with whiteness. These entanglements and drives present interesting implications for contemporary political subjectivity and ways of conceptualising access and identification in relation to texts.

Away from the margins

The notion of queerness situated at the centre of the narrative consistently came up in my interviews when discussing, with participants, why they were invested in particular queer images over others. One participant, Chiisana, writes,

When I was growing up, before there was an internet, there were very few examples of anyone who wasn't a straight white able-bodied dude being seen as worthy of being the centre (or even often the periphery) of a story. Everyone should be the center of the story of their own life, but the ubiquity of white straight dude stories over anything else meant that it was hard to imagine oneself as important and valuable if one was something else.

Chiisana encapsulates a desire to see diversity and (based on the wider context of my conversation with them) queerness at the centre of significance to the narrative. This is indicative of many responses from other fans. Chiisana utilises identity categories (“white straight dude”) to conceptualise the ways self-identification provides ‘access’ to texts (“imagine oneself”). This desire helps to explain why a character introduced as heterosexual will gain the investment of fans rather than a supporting character who is explicitly queer. One

reason for this impulse of narrative significance, I suggest, is that character development comes with a sense of power when queerness is placed at the centre of meaning-making. One heterosexual fan, Phoenix, writes about her frustration at the lack of development of heterosexual relationships:

I love the chemistry they share. All of my ships have more history and chemistry in their pinky fingers than most forced heterosexual relationships in fiction ... Heterosexual couples are often put together randomly. A boy and a girl happen to be in the same room, look at each other, smile coyly and BAM you got yourself a cheap romance. There's hardly ever any build up or foundation behind their love, it's mostly just ... there ... My ships have history, the characters worked on their relationship hard to forge a bond stronger than simple infatuation, their storylines are intertwined and they help each other grow as a person. Their canon love interests are often little more than footnotes to entertain the audience, or an excuse to show strictly heterosexual sex scenes.

The development of characters seems to be a fundamental aspect of the investment of fans in texts accused of queerbaiting. Fans become interested in the chemistry, in the potential that comes from build-up that is never actualised, and they want this centralised in the narrative. With centrality comes development and power over meaning-making. Anna writes:

For queer characters and storylines to be sewn into existing shows I think is really powerful, because there is an existing audience of straight/cis people who are already watching and are invested in it. Hopefully for them to see queer people then normalised in the same way alongside straight people, being treated the same way by the same media, will help to spread the idea that we're not really that different from them and are deserving of the same respect and representation that they are.

Queer characters at the centre of the narrative, for Anna, act as a means of normalising queerness to the straight gaze. Existing at the centre is a way for queers to be treated equally to straight people, to be treated as 'normal.'

The drive for centrality—to embody, conceptualise and remember queerness inside the margins—has been debated for decades. Writing in the mid-1990s, Henry Abelow comments on the shift occurring amongst queer students in his classroom at the time. In telling stories about the marginal history of gays and lesbians and gay rights movements pre-Stonewall, such as the Homophile movement and Daughters of Bilitis, Abelow observes his queer students rejecting this history. Instead, his students say:

Don't focus on histories that require the trope of marginalization for their telling. Let those histories of marginality be marginal. If the history of the homophile movement

has to be a story of struggle from the margin, then turn partly away from it. Focus on the musical comedies of the 1950s. What could be queerer? Or focus on the popular movies of the lesbian film director, Dorothy Arzner, and their reception. Or go back some years farther, and focus on the songs of Cole Porter. All these cultural productions were central rather than marginal. By ignoring or neglecting them, we misconceive the past and unwittingly reduce our presence in and claim to the present, they say. (1995, 49)

The shift in queer political subjectivity that Abelow observes mirrors contemporary impulses to see, desire and celebrate queerness at the centre of narratives within queerbaiting texts. Abelow's students were undoubtedly influenced by the works of Foucault and other postmodernists and poststructuralists, an influence Abelow himself suggests. However, fans in contemporary queerbaiting discourse make little or no mention of the same influence of queer theory, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Instead, this centre is articulated through identity politics and a call for increased visibility and character/plot development that is on equal footing with heterosexual characters and plots.

The desire for centrality raises the question of what subject positions are constructed and tolerated in this pursuit. What happens to queerness when it is only celebrated at the centre of meaning, narrative and culture? Queer fandom and the practice of slash are seen to exist at the margins, providing audiences, particularly queer audiences, with the pleasure of transformative viewing. This pleasure is partly derived from taking up a position of subversive marginality. Through slash they can enjoy a sense of community and a space to explore their queer desires and fannish practices. In some fandom and academic circles, however, there is an expectation that this pleasure can only be derived from direct identification. What does this imply about 'likeness' and 'access' to texts? As the previous chapters explored, queer representation is often framed by the need for queer people to see themselves reflected in media. To see queerness at the centre of meaning-making, and to distinguish positive and negative representation through notions of authenticity speak to how queer people see themselves reflected, and what modes of identification are being utilised and practiced.

Chiisana's portrayal of the current context of media visibility as centring on "white straight dude" stories is worth revisiting in the context of identification. Whiteness, along with other markers of privilege, is the visible identity category seen to dominate media stories. Through the identificatory process of 'likeness' and 'access' outlined above, I observe that queerbaiting discourse is often enmeshed with assumptions of whiteness. This is supported by the fact that the large majority of characters involved in queerbaiting debates are white, a fact shared by Chiisana and one that will be explored in the next

section. The overwhelming whiteness of characters is unfortunately also reflected in the whiteness of the participants in my interviews. All but one participant identified as a person of colour. Many in my study did, however, speak about the importance of racial diversity in media. When asked what makes for good or positive LGBTQ representation, they responded:

People of every race, gender, socioeconomic level, belief system, country, etc. are queer in real life. It should be that way on screen, too. (Cameron)

Not to mention, much of the existing LGBT representation is white. It would be nice and much more realistic to see diverse genders, races and sexualities being written into stories that aren't just about them being gay. (Anna)

Whilst it is promising that some participants were eager to point out racial inequality in media representation, as well as the importance of visible difference within the LGBTQ community, the whiteness of characters and texts accused of queerbaiting requires closer attention. The overwhelming whiteness of the participants is clearly a limitation of the study and potentially also speaks to the whiteness of fandom spaces more broadly. I do not mean to imply that fandom is not made up of fans of colour; however, the dominant discourse around fandom is deeply entangled with assumptions of whiteness, an entanglement this chapter will now explore.

Whiteness, likeness and access

Sexuality has largely been an object of inquiry, play and investment in fandom. However, some scholars have argued that transgression and queerness, as they are embodied through sexuality, are often attached to whiteness. Fandom researchers such as Rukmini Pande (2018) and Mel Stanfill (2018) argue that all issues of race are sidelined, erased or shut down in fandom in order for this queerness and joy to flourish. In slash fandom, in particular, characters introduced as heterosexual are the object of sexual imagination and play. They are the object of queer readings in which signifiers of queerness are read into/from them. However, what signifiers provide fertile queer ground for fans?

I argue that centrality is pivotal in the orientation of fans towards certain queerbaiting texts generally. We can see this in television shows that do not contain any recurring or main characters that are explicitly queer, where queerbaiting accusations tend to fall on the protagonists. *Sherlock*, *Supernatural* and *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018) are prominent examples of this. Despite queerness potentially being attached to any of the

supporting characters, it seems that queerbaiting controversies mostly surround characters that are central drivers of the narrative. Interestingly, this centrality is particularly evident when there are supporting characters who are explicitly queer. The teen-drama show *Riverdale* (2017–present) received accusations of queerbaiting when the marketing of the program used a clip of Betty (Lili Reinhart) and Veronica (Camila Mendes) kissing, despite both characters being straight (Gabriel 2017). The show does feature a number of supporting and recurring explicitly bisexual and gay characters including Kevin (Casey Cott), Cheryl (Madelaine Petsch), Toni (Vanessa Morgan), Moose (Cody Kearsley), and Fangs (Drew Ray Tanner), yet some fans still remain invested in seeing protagonists, Betty and Veronica, in a romantic relationship.

Within this desire for centrality, I locate investments in whiteness. Whiteness acts as a blank canvas onto (or from) which queerness is imagined, largely ignoring characters of colour in the process. Some fans and scholars have been critical of this oversight, particularly the racism and sexism that emerges when black women are seen as the heterosexual obstacle to a white male/male ship. This has occurred in the *Star Trek* film franchise directed by J. J. Abrams (2009, 2013) and Justin Lin (2016), and television shows *Merlin* (2008–2012) and *Sleepy Hollow* (2013–2017) (Fazekas 2014; Stitch 2016). In response to claims that many investments within fandom are racist, some white fans say they are not as invested in characters of colour because the characters are ‘heterosexual’ (Stanfill 2018). Yet, in many texts accused of queerbaiting, such as the examples listed above, fans are oriented towards and invested in characters that are mostly introduced as heterosexual. These white characters receive the same level of authorised heterosexual meaning given to characters of colour. Although the queer readings of many fans are indeed informed by paratextual content (Ng 2017), characters of colour who are not at the centre of the narrative—supporting or secondary characters—are given the same heterosexual introduction as white protagonists. Why, then, are queerbaiting debates mostly focused on white protagonists?

This attachment to centrality and whiteness is particularly evident in examples where fans will invest in the central white character, despite the show containing an explicitly queer character of colour. Although the *Supergirl* character Alex (Chyler Leigh) entered into a relationship with a Latina lesbian character Maggie (Floriana Lima) in the show’s second season, the queerbaiting controversy continues to be centred on white protagonists. Another prominent example is Fox TV series *Gotham* (2014–2019) that serves as a prequel to *Batman* comics in the DC Universe. Many fans became highly

invested in the two white male characters Edward Nygma (Cory Michael Smith) and Oswald Cobblepot (Robin Lord Taylor), calling for the two to become an explicit pairing. Fans accused the show of queerbaiting when such a pairing never manifested after believing they had been teased with the possibility through the marketing of the show. *Gotham*, however, contains explicitly queer characters of colour in supporting roles: Tabitha Galavan (Jessica Lucas) and Renee Montoya (Victoria Cartagena). These examples support my argument above, that is, in contemporary queer fandom involved in slash and queerbaiting discourse, what orients fans towards certain ‘queer’ texts seems, at present, to be shaped by centrality and whiteness. Again, I acknowledge that many of the queer readings by fans are informed by what they perceive to be romantic and sexual tension between the characters that simply may not be there for characters of colour or supporting characters. Their readings are also informed by paratextual content such as interviews with writers/actors and marketing material that similarly may not exist for characters of colour or supporting characters. Nevertheless, the prevalence and pervasiveness of whiteness and centrality requires further examination.

A prominent example of explicit queer characters of colour being sidelined in favour of white protagonists occurs in *Teen Wolf*. The slash ship “Sterek” (Stiles/Derek) spawned a large slash fandom when the show first aired in 2011, despite the secondary character Danny being an explicitly gay character of colour. Rather than call for more screen time for Danny, many fans were deeply invested in seeing Stiles and Derek become “endgame”.²⁷ One fan who was behind the online campaign “#Cookies for Sterek” gave an interview to *The Daily Dot* in which they explained that their desire for Sterek took precedence over the importance of queer representation:

For me, this is not about queer visibility. I think that’s very important. But what motivates me are these two characters in particular. I fell in love with them, individually and together, with their potential. That’s what made me start all this. There is something about Derek and Stiles together that calls to me. Jeff Davis [the creator of *Teen Wolf*] said, if I recall it correctly, that he knew they were magic from the start. That’s exactly what I felt when I first started to watch *Teen Wolf*. (quoted in Romano 2012)

It is the characters themselves that drive this fan towards *Teen Wolf*. We can see here that it is the centrality of Derek and Stiles that plays an important role for some fans in their investments, not necessarily the importance of queer visibility as is often said in their

²⁷ “Endgame” refers to characters becoming an explicit romantic pairing in the primary narrative by the end of the show.

criticisms of queerbaiting. In response to a question asking if the introduction of a Sterek storyline would seem forced, the fan responded:

We don't even want Sterek to get together in Season 3. We want a slow build toward a romantic development between them. We want it to happen naturally. We already see their potential, but we know they are yet not there. We know they can be, though! That's what we want, to see their journey, individual and together, toward a love story. That's what the fandom is rooting for, IMO [in my opinion]—the kind of romantic development any straight couple would have. (quoted in Romano 2012)

This echoes many sentiments expressed by fans in my interviews. Phoenix wrote that she loves the “chemistry” between the characters, and Anna expressed admiration for shows that have queer storylines “sewn into” already existing characters. Further, Chiisana notes that queer characters are rarely placed at the “centre of the story.” The build-up that is given to these characters (once introduced as heterosexual) and the placement of them as driving the narrative rather than supporting it are all implicated in the dynamics of whiteness. The whiteness of characters that are granted this development and positioning speaks to a wider racist culture in media, a culture that rarely grants characters of colour equitable airtime. However, the question remains as to why many fans are invested in the chemistry and build-up in white characters and rarely in characters of colour.

The transformative, playful, and subversive queerness in slash fandom is largely reserved for white characters. As we have seen, this ignores characters of colour, even ones who are explicitly queer in the primary narrative. So prolific is this trend in slash that it has been coined the “Two White Guys” trope (Fanlore 2013). The naming of the trope aims to not only highlight what some argue is the racism of fandom, but also to point out the lengths to which fans will go to invest in the queerness of two white guys at the expense of characters of colour, even when such white guys have little interaction on screen. Chapter one highlighted this practice when American network CBS aired a retelling of the Sherlock Holmes stories with Lucy Liu playing the female character Dr Joan Watson, previously one half of the m/m slash pairing “Johnlock.” The gender swap of the characters was seen by many fans as a negation of the queerness of John and Sherlock, and as evidence of homophobia (Prudom 2012). These criticisms erase any potential effects of positive representation that may exist through the casting of the first Asian-American woman as a lead in a primetime American series. One commenter wrote,

A possible or indicated homoerotic subtext between Holmes and Watson has always been a topic of interest for readers and fans ... So the CBS just takes the wind out of the fans' sails by turning one of those characters female – now they can have a nice little affair going on – or not – without accidentally implying 'dirty gay subtext.' (quoted Andreeva 2012)

The initial response of many fans to the casting announcement was based on the presumption of an eventual actualised (or more accepted and acknowledged implicit) romantic/sexual relationship between Sherlock and John. Yet, the lack of focus on positive representational diversity politics speaks to the centring and investment of slash fandom in whiteness. The transformative queer potential of slash must be called into question when such queerness often relies on the erasure of women and characters of colour. As Angela Fazekas writes, "Slash fandom's obsessive focus on Two White Guys, built on the erasure and belittlement of characters of colour, repeatedly effaces the radical potential inherent in creating transformative works" (2014, 60).

As we have seen throughout this thesis, sexuality has been the subject of much inquiry within fandom studies and queer theory more broadly. It is the category through which queerness has been articulated. Race, however, is often seen as an external identity and experience that must be studied in addition to gender and sexuality, not as intrinsic to queerness itself (Barnard 2004). For example, Ross (2005) outlines how whiteness was crucial for the invention of modern sexuality. The presumption of racial sameness among sexologists and subjects allowed for sexual difference to be conceptualised. Further, Kohnen (2015) outlines how the beginnings of the AIDS crisis also saw racial sameness (whiteness of doctors and patients) as fundamental to the understanding of AIDS as affecting a gay 'community.' Such racial sameness allowed for the 'community' to be separated and othered from the heterosexual norm. We can see here that race is significant for a conception of queerness, yet in much of fandom and some tenets of queer theory it is largely sidelined in favour of gender and sexuality.

In Ross and Kohnen's analysis of racial sameness, whiteness acts as a blank canvas onto which queerness can be projected and embodied. The 'whiteness' of slash fiction and queerbaiting texts, however, is not only descriptive of the characters in which fans are invested, but also of the lack of discussion of race in fandom spaces. Pande (2018) has written extensively about this erasure and the hostility that fans of colour face when issues of race are brought to attention. Using Sara Ahmed's (2010) conception of the "feminist killjoy," Pande outlines how fans of colour are seen as killjoys when they discuss race or criticise racism within fandom. The joy being killed by fans of colour here is the affective

manifestation of the purported radical, transformative queer potential of fandom. When highlighting the racism of this potential, fans of colour are placed in the position of killjoy, an act of hostility and silencing. As Ann Jamison explains, “fanfic hasn’t done the kinds of deconstruction and reimagining of race and ethnicity that it’s done for gender and sexuality” (2013, 342). Sexuality within fandom is seen as the space for queerness, transgression and power. Race, however, is positioned as an external force that threatens the joy and radical, transformative, queer potential of fandom.

This attachment to whiteness presents boundaries to transgressive politics and transformative fandom. Queer theory is invested in the deconstruction and destabilisation of normative binaries of gender and sexuality; however, as in contemporary fandom, boundaries and policing of these transformative politics are present. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick draws on Gayle Rubin’s distinction of gender and sexuality in *Thinking Sex* (1984) to argue that sexuality provides a space for more transgression and ambiguity than gender. She writes that all people are “assigned to one or the other gender, and from birth” whereas “sexual orientation, with its far greater potential for rearrangement, ambiguity, and representational doubleness ... offer(s) the apter deconstructive object” (34). Sexuality exceeds “the bare choreographies of procreation,” she writes, whereas gender occupies “the polar position of the relational, the social/symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the representational” (29). This distinction points to a wider trend in queer politics that sought to distinguish sexuality from gender. The implication was that sexuality is reified as the site for political transgression and the basis for deconstruction of wider hegemonic sexual norms. ‘Queerness,’ in the deconstructive sense, has been therefore attached largely to sexuality, not gender.

Judith Butler (1994) and Biddy Martin (1994) criticise this trend in gay and lesbian studies of instating a distinction between gender and sexuality—epistemologically and methodologically—and privileging sexuality as the category with more deconstructive and transgressive potential. Butler criticises Sedgwick’s use of Rubin to distinguish between gender and sexuality in this way, writing that, “Whereas Rubin saw the turn to sexuality as a way to provide a framework which would include and link queers, transgendered people, cross-generational partners, prostitutes, Sedgwick understands sexuality as the proper domain of lesbian and gay studies or, rather, of ‘an antihomophobic inquiry’” (1994, 15). The designation of sexuality as the ‘proper domain’ of gay and lesbian studies further overlooks other areas of inquiry such as race and class. Martin similarly criticises the distinction between gender and sexuality and the implicit notion that gender cannot be

grounds for transgression, deconstruction and reworking as much as sexuality. Rather, she argues that gender “is both more and less than we make it. It is more than a fixed ground that can be easily overridden by what we call ‘sexuality’” (1994, 120). Gender identities and expressions can be sites of deconstruction with infinite possibilities of shifts and complications. Queerness, therefore, should not be limited to sexuality as the only site of political transgression and deconstruction. Such positioning erases other elements of identity, expression and subjectivity.

In contemporary fandom, queerness still seems to be positioned and conceptualised as the proper domain of whiteness. As stated earlier, whiteness operates as a blank canvas onto which queer imaginings are placed, which thereby positions whiteness at the centre of narrative and meaning-making. The political sites of transgression and play in slash are similarly entangled in dynamics of whiteness, just as queerness was attached to sexuality more so than gender for Sedgwick. The drive for centrality within contemporary queerbaiting discourse sees fans ultimately centring whiteness and with it the radical, transformative and deconstructive potential of queerness.

How then do we assess the transformative potential of slash? As we saw in chapter one, studies of slash fiction have claimed that women engage in slash between male characters to fantasise and envision romance and sex without patriarchal gender roles (Russ 1985; Penley 1991; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Neville 2018). These studies suggest that slash provides egalitarian depictions of couplings through fantastical imaginings. Contemporary scholars have utilised blogger *obsession_inc*’s (2009) conception of “affirmational” and “transformational” fandom to analyse slash’s transformative potential. “Affirmational” fandom depicts fans as reinforcing the dominant ideology and authorised meaning of the text through their fandom, whereas “transformative” fandom depicts fans as countering, contradicting or otherwise opposing the authority of the writers over a text’s meaning. In this way, slash fiction can be described as a transformative, “queer female space” (Lothian et al. 2007, 103). It sees women appropriating heterosexual texts away from a heteronormative ideology and mass culture that “problematizes clear straight/gay dichotomies” (Busse 2005, 122). Neville (2018) points to the community that women have created around slash that she claims has given them the ability to explore their own relationship to gender and sexuality. “[M/M erotica] subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values,” Neville writes, “providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, and encouraging many sex-positive values. Is it any wonder that some women like it?” (2015, 204). For the women in

Neville's study, slash is a transformative, emancipatory space and practice that empowers them by challenging the authority of the heteronormative ideology of a text.

However, Pande (2018) argues that slash fiction is so steeped in whiteness that any of its benefits in the queer awakenings of fans are simply not available to fans of colour. Fazekas (2014) also claims that slash does not allow fans of colour to engage with and participate in its transformative potential. She argues that the ideology of white supremacy underpins so much of slash fiction and the imaginings of queerness by fans that slash texts "work to support systems of colonial and racial domination" (2014, 61). These scholars argue that the transformative potential of slash is fictitious. In so doing they draw attention to race as the ultimate marker of access for fans, particularly when whiteness dominates representations of characters and depictions of fans and fandom in media. However, what does the mobilisation of these racial politics of diversity mean for contemporary representation and identificatory practices?

Alexander Doty (1995) highlights the nuanced identificatory practice of spectatorship in his analyses of queer readings. On the queer pleasures that resonate for audiences, he writes:

You might identify yourself as a lesbian or a straight woman yet queerly experience the gay erotics of male buddy films such as *Red River* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; or maybe as a gay man your cultlike devotion to *Laverne and Shirley*, *Kate and Allie*, or *The Golden Girls* has less to do with straight-defined cross-gender identification than with your queer enjoyment in how these series are crucially concerned with articulating the loving relationships between women. (84)

By assuming that access to texts is only possible when characters match the perceived racial identity of fans, an intersectional analysis is lost. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality aims to account for the convergence of misogyny and racism experienced by black women. She demonstrates her theory by pointing to the failure of mainstream racial or feminist political movements to move beyond their monocausal paradigms. She argues that these movements consider blackness at the expense of feminism and vice versa. Rather than viewing racism or misogyny as experiences to consider in addition to each other, the experiences of women of colour highlight the intersectionality of axes of oppressions and identity, and that such divisions cannot be made. What I want to suggest is that an intersectional framework might offer possibilities for rethinking access and identification through the acknowledgment of multiple and converging identities and experiences.

José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification also challenges the assumption of identity or visible likeness as a singular pathway to access and identification. He provides a useful lens through which to understand the multiplicity of identifications, gazes, and modes of access that marginalised people, particularly queer people of colour, experience and utilise. Muñoz's theory examines how queer people of colour negotiate identity and (dis)identification in a white and cis/heteronormative racial and sexual order. He writes that, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to 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" (1999, 4). Rather than identifying (assimilating) or counter-identifying (rejecting), queer people of colour engage in a process of disidentification, a practice that simultaneously works with and against the dominant cultural norm. This process for Muñoz is a survival strategy, allowing the subject to work with and through these sexual and racial orders. Access to texts in relation to identification and pleasure is not as simple as being mediated through perceived racial likeness, but rather, involves a process of strategic and tactical disidentification. This theory is founded on the understanding of the intersecting modes of oppression, resistance and identity that queer people of colour incorporate into their relationship with texts that exist within dominant culture.

Positioning visible, racial likeness as the ultimate marker of access for fans reinforces an essentialist identity politics framework. This framework insists on notions of authenticity and identity in granting authority, privileging certain identities over others. So powerful is this authority that one participant wrote, "I also think that best queer representation in media is stuff that is actually written by queer people and performed by queer actors. They are the only ones who can give us authentic fictional content, because when straight/cis people write queer content, it never feels quite right" (Julia). As I have suggested, when queerness becomes the primary marker of access, experiences of fans of colour are ignored or erased. I argue that whilst media diversity is important and valuable, visible likeness cannot be delineated based on authentic identity categories. Within queerbaiting discourse, whiteness as an identity category has been subsumed under the notion of queer visibility. Queerness is able to be read onto and from characters because they are perceived to be blank canvases (white) that correspond to previous representations, imaginings and knowledge of queerness. What I have so far argued in this chapter is that when white characters dominate the position of meaning-making and drive the narrative,

whiteness becomes deeply entangled with the very notion of centrality that orients fans to particular texts. With these attachments to centrality in mind, the question remains of what these attachments reveal about this contemporary form of queer political subjectivity for fans.

Central queerness and marginal sexuality

The rejection of marginality in favour of centrality has implications for the function and political saliency of queerness in representational politics. To reiterate a question posed at the outset of this chapter, what happens to queerness when it is only celebrated at the centre of meaning, narrative and culture? We can see how fans are reworking queerness through the trope of centrality. To the question of what they believe makes good or positive queer representation, Frogg replied, a representation in which a queer person is depicted as simply a “human being who just happens to be gay/bi.” This response encapsulates the sentiment expressed by many fans in my interviews. They claim that good representation of queer people positions their sexuality as just one of many human characteristics:

Well, for one thing, the character should be more than their sexuality or gender identity. Their identity is important, obviously, but it's not the only thing important about them. So, of course I like coming out stories, but I'd like to see more gay characters who are more than just ‘the gay character.’ (Margot)

[Good queer representation is] real characters with real personalities ... It's when it's ‘token gay character[s] with no actual personality’ that it doesn't work. (Callum)

I'd like to see queer characters for whom their queerness is treated as normal, established and not the most important thing about them. (Anna)

What these fans are calling for is representation in which sexuality is sidelined, although significant. This kind of portrayal, they suggest, is what is required for characters to enter the centre of the narrative. Otherwise, queerness runs the risk of being ‘tokenised’ when it is all encompassing of a character’s narrative. Such tokenism sees all notable features of their character and story centred around their sexuality.

The normalisation of queerness in this drive towards the centre highlights a contradiction for any queer politics invested in the deconstruction of identity.²⁸ When asked what makes positive queer representation, Ari replied, “It shows the queer characters as being more than ‘the token queer character’ and sheds light on their romances as something just as

²⁸ There has, however, been some criticism of the supposition that the intersection between “queer” as a politics and theory exists in the critique of normativity (see Wiegman 2015).

natural and beautiful as heterosexual romance.” Tokenism for Ari also entails the inauthentic depiction of a queer character in a merely supporting or sidelined role within the narrative. Ari’s desire to see queerness as equivalent to heterosexual romance highlights this normalising impulse to centre queerness in a ‘heterosexual’ mainstream narrative. Indeed, this desire to treat queerness as just one aspect of a character’s personality is so strong in ideas of positive representation for fans, that one fan, Laura, said “we need to treat LGBT characters in the same way we treat their straight counterparts.” Further, when explaining why the HBO series *The Wire* (2002–2008) provided “amazing queer representation,” Miles stated “the relationships were not dramatised for entertainment and the characters were more than their sexuality. The show never made a scene out of it, there would be a cut and we’ll see this character at home with her wife, and it goes on.” By not focusing on a character’s queerness, queer characters are able to receive the same development as straight ones. They are then considered by fans to be authentic representations that drive the central narrative, not tokens that support heterosexual protagonists from the sidelines.

When Miles and other fans criticise the dramatisation of queer people for entertainment, what does this negative representation actually look like? What does this dramatisation involve and what form of entertainment needs to be served for queer images and narratives to be labelled as negative? When explaining why the gay character Matt from *Melrose Place* was an example of tokenism and negative representation, Callum said the show “tended to focus on negative things like how hard it was for them.” The belief that the “negative things” that mark gay people’s lives in media are themselves negative representation was also echoed by Anna:

... positive queer representation is true to the real-life experiences of queer people. There are many millions of us in the world, but the stories historically being told tend to be about the pain and fear of being closeted and coming out, about how ‘taboo’ same-sex relationships are, and about rejection and suffering.

Similarly, Lilly praises the representation in the comedy series, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013–present): “[because it shows the characters having] nice and steady lives ... they have [their] own personalities that have nothing to do with their sexualities and yet we get to see Holt’s husband Kevin and see them in a healthy relationship. They also are not defined by [their] sexuality.” These quotes are interesting in light of the deployment of trauma politics by fans in their effort to highlight the harms of queerbaiting. Because queer people experience trauma, queerbaiting is seen as all the more insidious and uniquely harmful. Yet, telling stories about this trauma, as we explored in the criticism of the bury your gays trope, is linked to a history

of censorship and punishment on screen. Whilst the promise and orientation towards happiness is clear in these quotes, the desire to reject the “negative things” in queer lives and relegate queerness as just “one of many” characteristics that does not define a character, is ultimately a desire to centre queerness.

Centring queerness is also imagined through the amount of screen time a character receives. As chapter one explored, queers have been relegated to the margins of mainstream popular and screen culture throughout the twentieth century through both formal and informal censorship, restrictions and incentives. However, this is not to suggest that queer people are not still sidelined in film and television. In fact, the GLAAD report on representation in television from 2018–2019 found that only 8.8% of broadcast scripted series contained regular LGBTQ characters. Whilst the television landscape across all platforms showed a significant increase from previous years, LGBTQ characters are still among a small minority on television. Similarly, of the 110 films released by major studios in 2018 that GLAAD analysed, only 18.2% contained a character that identified as LGBTQ, an increase of 5.4% from the previous year. However, this percentage includes any character explicitly identified as LGBTQ; it does not indicate the amount of screen time the character received. As Bridges’ (2018) genealogy of queerbaiting demonstrates, the desire of fans to see queer people at the centre of the narrative is connected to this history of relegation to the margins, and is not unfounded in the contemporary context of mainstream popular and screen culture. Indeed, the amount of screen time was important for fans in their assessment of positive or negative queer representation: “they need to have actual screen time. So many LGBT characters are tokenised and sidelined” (Margot). When discussing why the series *Supernatural* has not provided positive queer representation, Margot explained:

The show has only had a few LGBT characters to begin with. None of them were main characters. There was one lesbian character, Charlie Bradbury ... she was an awesome character, and her plot lines weren't just about being gay. However, she was a minor character and was only in a few episodes. We weren't really shown many interactions between her and women. And then she was killed off. The only other LGBT characters I can think of were minor, and their sexualities were often used as a punchline.

The centrality of queer characters is pivotal for fans in their desire to see representation. It also provides the foundation for much of their assessment of whether such representation is positive or negative. Even though Charlie is seen as an example of a positive portrayal of a queer character, to the extent that her narrative did not centre on her sexuality, her lack of screen time and her eventual removal from the narrative entirely (through her death) ultimately positions her as an example of negative queer representation.

The centrality of queer people within the narrative is identified as a way to authenticate the queerness of the character. Inauthenticity is ascribed to characters who are included in a piece of media in a supporting role and/or are merely used as props to increase a diversity quota. Their narrative may centre on their sexuality and not be as developed as their straight counterparts. One participant highlights this notion of authenticity when questioning why a queer character was included in *Supergirl*: “I’m not sure why the writers added in a queer character. It could be for any number of reasons. More and more shows have queer characters now, so they might have done it to be on trend” (Morgan). When queer characters are seen as inauthentic depictions, such as undeveloped token characters, it speaks to the (inauthentic) intentions of the writers who only include queer characters to highlight their diversity and inclusivity credentials. Authenticity also speaks to the portrayal of queer people. Cameron specifically mentioned authenticity when asked what makes for good representation of gay or bisexual people:

Authenticity. Queer people are just people. We are good and bad, smart and dumb, ambitious and lazy. Being bi is not who I am. It’s just one random fact about the million others about me. I don’t want to see a character written as bi just so she can make out with another girl on camera and excite the viewers, just like I hate when drunk girls do crap like that in bars to get attention. If a character isn’t straight, that’s not the only interesting thing about them. That’s not their whole reason for existing. When I see people being people who happen to be queer, that’s good representation, to me. People of every race, gender, socioeconomic level, belief system, country, etc. are queer in real life. It should be that way on screen, too. We’re a long way from that right now.

The sexualisation of bisexual women, or ‘girl-on-girl’ action, is presented here as another inauthentic reason to represent queer people. Including queer people at the centre of the narrative allows the characters to be written with the same development, attention and power over meaning-making as their heterosexual counterparts.

Presenting queerness with this power becomes memorable to fans. In his criticism of *Melrose Place*, Cameron said of the character Matt, “I remember absolutely nothing about [him] other than that there was a gay character who I believe was named Matt on Melrose Place.” Cameron’s comment highlights a similar desire Abelow observes in his students, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter. The notion that inauthentic representation is not memorable to these fans demonstrates a contemporary political subjectivity that aims to situate queerness away from the margins and into the centre of mainstream popular and screen culture. Fans are oriented towards the memorable characters, the ones with power over the narrative, and who have development and backstory. Yet within

queerbaiting, these characters are often introduced as heterosexual and, as illustrated in the previous section, are usually white. We have seen how prevalent the desire to centre queerness is within queerbaiting discourse; however, is such a drive evident when queerness is removed from the medium of fictionalised storytelling? The phenomenon of real-person celebrities being accused of queerbaiting provides a useful case study to answer this question.

Celebrity queerbaiting

This chapter has so far highlighted how the drive for centrality—a centrality entangled in whiteness—largely influences the orientation of fans towards certain fictionalised media accused of queerbaiting. Celebrity queerbaiting similarly highlights an investment in centrality. The real-person celebrities who are accused of queerbaiting are thought to be gaining (and enjoying) access to the centre of mainstream popular culture through their ostensible heterosexuality, whilst appealing to queer audiences through teasing or hinting they may experience same-sex attraction. These ‘straight’ celebrities have the backstory, the build-up, the development so coveted by fans. Queerbaiting discourse presumes that queerness has infiltrated this centre by suggesting that the ‘straight’ celebrities are queer through their implied same-sex attraction. Celebrity queerbaiting discourse presents a shift in contemporary political subjectivity, leaving marginal queerness at the periphery of culture, narrative and meaning.

The queerness in celebrity queerbaiting for fans is located around the perceived sexuality of celebrity, which is cultivated and manufactured in their persona or star image. Queer theoretical analyses of star images have often focused not on locating the ‘truth’ of a star, but on what meanings have been produced, and how queer audiences interpret and utilise these meanings. Scholars such as Richard Dyer (1986) are particularly interested in the relationship between queer audience and female celebrity. Such a dynamic, Dyer asserts, illuminates the ways queer identity and subjectivity are constituted and negotiated in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. Michael DeAngelis (2001) shifted this focus on the camp appeal of female stars to examine certain male celebrities and their gay male fandoms. Similarly, these fandoms speak to various historical moments of articulation of gay subjectivity and the political economy of production in which these star figures operated. The “crossover appeal” (DeAngelis 2001) of these celebrity figures (their appeal to both straight and gay audiences) highlights a particular practice of queer reading, mode of identification, and perception of branding and marketing.

The identification that DeAngelis observes in gay-male fandoms of James Dean, Mel Gibson and Keanu Reeves involves both perceived likeness and difference. DeAngelis identifies likeness as allowing the viewer to enter into the fantasy scenario (whether through screen roles or public persona) whilst the difference/distance between the self and Other activates the dynamic of desire between subject and object. The fantasy scenario for DeAngelis draws on Linda Williams' theorisation of the melodramatic fantasy of origin in which the audience attempts the impossible task of regaining the loss of their whole self and their origin through returning to "an earlier state most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother" (DeAngelis 2001, 6). This separation is most clearly highlighted by the fateful separation of two protagonists in the melodrama film. DeAngelis notes that the fantasy separation is also evident in the dynamic of gay male fans and the male stars he analyses. The perception of likeness and difference for DeAngelis underpins the desires of gay male fans. These fans perceive likeness and access to identification partly through Dean, Gibson and Reeve's potential experience of same-sex attraction. The difference is mostly enacted through the distance of fan from celebrity stardom and crossover appeal of the stars to heterosexual audiences. The impossible fantasy of finding the other half and returning to a sense of wholeness—of overcoming the distance of difference—is the desire upon which these fandoms are cultivated:

In all cases, if an audience's interest in fantasy remains pleasurable only to the extent that ultimate resolutions are deferred, film studios and public relations agencies maintain a significant economic investment in extending the star's process of emergence and redemption by withholding and disclosing information over the course of a career. (DeAngelis 2001, 7)

The appeal of these stars is their simultaneous mystery and tangibility. John Mercer (2013) argues that this mystery is fundamental for the construction of the male sex symbol. He argues that sexual desirability of the male sex symbol is "a puzzle that has to be worked out or made sense of in some kind of way" (89). This working out speaks to what DeAngelis refers to as "overcoming spatial boundaries" between the desiring subject and desired object (2001, 16). By working out the sexuality of celebrities, gay male fans are enacting a traversal of self and Other by attempting to 'know' their desired object. The stars simultaneously become intangible objects of heterosexual, celebrity culture and attainable, knowable objects of queer subcultural fandom. I argue that the desire of audiences to traverse spatial boundaries in their queer reading fantasies of 'straight' male celebrities marks the impulse to see queerness at the centre of meaning-making and

mainstream popular culture. This is seen in queerness traversing from the margins to the centre via the stars' secret queerness and the celebrities from objects of heterosexual culture to tangible, desired objects of gay male sexual fantasies. I suggest that traversing spatial boundaries in access and identification, as observed by DeAngelis, is also evident in queerbaiting discourse.

The construction of audiences' queer desires in celebrity queerbaiting discourse also encourages a "working out strategy" (2013, 89) that Mercer identifies in the desire for male sex symbols. However, I argue that this is also present in the dynamic between audiences and female celebrities accused of queerbaiting, not just male sex symbols. This working out, in a contemporary celebrity queerbaiting context, is a fan activity in which audiences are encouraged to invest in their strategic decoding. It is both an affirmational engagement with text and a deliberate transformational reworking of context. Affirmational and transformational aspects of fan engagement with celebrities exist simultaneously and often rest upon the perception of the intentions of celebrity themselves. This raises two questions. Do celebrities want audiences to invest in the mystery of their sexual desirability and orientation? Are they deliberately remaining ambiguous to maintain their crossover appeal and their position within and access to the centre of mainstream culture? Of course, such questions cannot be definitively answered, as I would not pretend to know the intentions of celebrities; however, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the perception of authorial intent is foundational to accusations and criticisms of queerbaiting.

Dyer (1986) analyses the star image of Judy Garland in an attempt to discover what oriented a marginalised group (gay men) towards her as a figure of identification. He outlines Garland's career trajectory from ordinary female star to her later rejection or exclusion of normative feminine expectations (such as settling down in a life of marriage and domesticity) by the studio system. This anti-normativity, Dyer suggests, paralleled gay men's experience at the time. They 'accessed' Garland as an identificatory figure by identifying with a similar anti-normative social positioning. Likeness for gay male fans of Garland was not explicitly based on identity categories of sexual orientation or gender identity. Yet, as we have seen within contemporary queerbaiting discourse and wider representational politics, visible likeness is focused on particular identity categories that are privileged over others such as race. One participant spoke of the importance of identification and visibility: "Growing up there was no one like me on TV...There were no lesbian characters I could look up to, to show me that what I was feeling was normal and 'ok'" (DW). When DW states that there was no one like her on television, she is clearly

referring to lesbians. Likeness, it seems, is reserved for sexual orientation. However, I would argue that for many fans, this access is also potentially reliant upon other, less acknowledged signifiers of likeness, such as race. Whiteness, as I have been arguing, is centred within imaginings (and reflections) of queerness when queer visibility is favoured at the expense of the acknowledgement of race. Another participant spoke of this likeness, stating that a show would stand to lose fewer audience members if a character came out as queer if they were part of a large ensemble cast. In television shows with a lot of characters like *Gotham*, Kara writes, “you’ve still got a wide range of characters for people to identify with. But with casts with only two to three main characters [like *Sherlock*, for example], you would inevitably get the people protesting that they can’t identify with a queer character/narrative” (Kara). Kara suggests that some non-queer viewers may argue that they cannot identify with a queer character. Queerness, for Kara, becomes all-encompassing of access and identification with characters, the all-or-nothing signifier of likeness.

Gay male fans of Judy Garland, on the other hand, were not reliant on her mirroring the identity categories of gay and male to allow them access to her as an identificatory figure. Instead, her failure to meet norms and standards required of female stars, her anti-normativity, provided access. Her scandals involving substance abuse reflected an image of authenticity that seemed to reflect her ‘real’ self, contrasting the image that the studios supposedly wished to project. Garland did not conform to the standards required of stars, or indeed of women, by the studios, record companies or mainstream culture. Her authentic image defied hegemonic norms. Dyer suggests that this idea of authenticity defiant of normative expectations led gay men towards Garland as an icon.

This form of queer authenticity also underlies contemporary conceptions of celebrity as a performative practice of branding. Even amongst openly gay celebrities, their queerness is packaged, repurposed and incorporated into images of authentic selves. Michael Lovelock (2017) asserts in his analysis of coming out videos of openly gay, white YouTube stars Hannah Nilsen and Connor Franta that gayness is marketed as just another aspect of their authentic, commodified selves. As Franta says in his video where he reveals his sexuality to the audience:

In true Connor Franta fashion, I’m gonna end my videos like I always do, because this is just another video, it’s just another video where you’ve found out a little more about me. So until next Monday, make sure you give this video a big thumbs up, leave a comment below, check out my other videos, click subscribe. Bye! (quoted in Lovelock 2017, 94)

Lovelock accurately points out that Franta's sexuality is commodified as merely another facet of his portrayal of an authentic self. For openly queer celebrities, the authenticity required for the successful practice of celebrity commodifies their sexuality as just one aspect of their 'inner' self. Just as queerness for fans operates as only one aspect of a character in positive representations, sexuality for openly queer celebrities functions to authenticate and provide the basis for fan identification and, thus, consumption.

Authenticity is foundational to celebrity as a performative practice. The current fragmented media landscape encourages shifts in celebrity management from the days of the studio system in Hollywood to a more personalised, active mode of control (Marwik and Boyd 2011). Many celebrities must now utilise social media to construct, navigate and manage access to their 'backstage.' Backstage refers to the dramaturgical metaphors utilised by Erving Goffman (1959) that outline how identity is presented and performed. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman suggests that individuals have a "frontstage" in which they present themselves in ways they wish the Other (audience) to see and know them, whereas "backstage" is where this performance is halted and the 'real' individual is revealed. Goffman's metaphors have been taken up by scholars of celebrity studies not to identify the 'real' persona of a celebrity, but to suggest that the illusion of a real, authentic self is foundational to the cultivation of celebrity. As Dyer writes, the performativity of authenticity in celebrity stardom drives audiences to believe that "what is behind or below the surface is, unquestionably and virtually by definition, the truth" (1991, 36).

Social media has advanced this management and exacerbated notions of celebrity agency, and thus, authenticity. Marwik and Boyd (2011) argue that successful celebrity management involves stars providing audiences with the perception of "uncensored glimpses" (140) of their backstage. Blurring of private and public spheres in celebrity management suggests a contradictory impulse to maintain a private self, whilst enabling or producing performed insights into the authentic backstage (Raphael and Lam 2017). Nowhere is this more evident than in the proliferation of celebrity selfies (Jersley and Moortensen 2016). Celebrities posting images of themselves in their private, everyday lives is the epitome of controlled glimpses of a constructed backstage. Of course, these images are usually highly stylised, produced and carefully disseminated. Yet, the continuous relationship, facilitated by fans 'following' celebrities on their social media accounts, allows these backstage glimpses to appear consensual, as opposed to the publication of photos taken by paparazzi, for example. Selfies suggest that celebrities have

seized control of the access to their backstage and are enjoying increased levels of agency and, therefore, accountability. Accountability is crucial for celebrity queerbaiting discourse as it is the perception of agency and intentionality that provides critics with the ‘evidence’ of exploitation.

Queerness in the YouTubers’ coming out videos and in queerbaiting debates suggests an insight into the backstage, into the authentic self. The backstage thereby has the illusion of being authentic, as it includes the supposed intentions of the celebrity. However, the queerness that surrounds celebrities accused of queerbaiting is criticised as inauthentic, just as the backstage that centres on the ‘truth’ of their sexuality is deemed inauthentic. In criticisms and accusations of queerbaiting, this inauthenticity is seen as evidence of their intentional desire to exploit audiences.

This leaves very little room for fluidity in the expression of same-sex desire. One particularly notable queerbaiting controversy occurred in an episode of “Carpool Karaoke,” a segment of the late-night talk show, *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (2015–present), in which Corden drives around with celebrities (usually musicians) while they sing along to the guest’s music and other famous songs. In the episode that featured former *One Direction* boy-band member, Harry Styles, Styles and Corden exchange a kiss. Towards the end of the video, Styles and Corden lean in and kiss on the lips, with Styles saying, “Merry Christmas” and Corden replying, “wow, I did not expect that for Christmas.” The video was immediately met with mixed reviews. Some fans were quick to celebrate Styles’ comfort, with one Twitter user writing, “Harry is comfortable in his sexuality and I think that’s beautiful like he knew that kiss was gonna be on TV and all over the place and he didn’t care.” However, others condemned the kiss as poking fun at homosexuality, not representing Styles’ comfort with sexual fluidity or experimentation. Another user writes, “Ya’ll going ham over James Corden kissing Harry Styles. They aren’t doing it [to] combat the rules of masculinity. They did it cause it’s laughable to see two dudes kissing and even set it up as such. It’s homophobic af [as fuck].” One writer for the online news site “HighSnobiety,” criticised the kiss by focusing on the double standard facing gay men:

The fact remains that straight men get praised for being open to kissing other dudes, whereas gay men just open themselves up to homophobia. When someone like Corden locks lips with another guy, it’s deemed acceptable because he isn’t a ‘threat,’ whereas gay men are still treated as sexual predators. (Hall 2017)

I agree that there clearly exists a different standard for two openly gay men kissing. For instance, such an event is unlikely to receive the same level of comedic response that Styles and Corden elicited. In this way, I concur with some of the critics who highlight the possible homophobic implications of laughing at the image of two men kissing. However, what space is there for Styles to be “comfortable in his sexuality” as one Twitter user suggested? If the kissing is met with laughter, what meanings are being presented to the audience? I argue that both meanings can exist simultaneously. Leaving their intentions aside, Styles and Corden could elicit sexual titillation as one viewer implied: “James are you aware that you are living the dream of like [a] thousand fangirls?” They could present homosexuality as abject, as an object of ridicule, disgust and laughter. Simultaneously, they could destabilise masculinity and heterosexuality, whilst naturalising sexual fluidity. All of these meanings can exist simultaneously for different audiences.

Within wider celebrity queerbaiting discourse there is little room for sexual fluidity. It seems to me that the focus on identity within these debates—that is, how a celebrity identifies and what desires correspond to such identities—has largely erased the potential for expressions of fluidity of sexual desire. However, as we saw in chapter two, there is space for fluidity and growth within fan conceptions of sexuality, although the focus on identity somewhat inhibits their transformative, deconstructive potential. Whilst some fans may believe that people (and characters) can experience growth or change in sexuality, the need for an identity to correspond to sexual-object choice removes the ability for ‘straight’ celebrities, such as Styles and Corden, to explore their sexuality. The punitive climate of representational politics makes it very difficult for exploration without being criticised as exploiting queer audiences because of their lack of identification with a queer label at a given moment. What becomes the focus of such moments instead are the intentions of the celebrities. Were their intentions to explore their sexuality, to encourage sexual fluidity, to destigmatise homosexuality, to ridicule homosexuality, to capitalise on being seen as progressive, or to exploit the scandal? It is likely a combination of these possibilities. Or, for all I know, perhaps they did not think much about the implications of their kiss outside of how they both experienced it in the moment. As we explored in chapter two, the figure of the Author (or the author function) is central to these debates. Authorial intent is centralised in order to lay blame and criticism onto Styles and Corden. The creative collaboration behind the video (such as the producers and editors) is largely erased.

The focus on identity labels within celebrity queerbaiting debates effectively reinforces binaries of experience that purportedly correspond to levels of privilege. For

many critics, privilege surrounds those celebrities accused. It is the privilege that the stars' ostensible heterosexuality grants them that allows for some level of control over the extent to which they are read as queer. Critics argue that such control enables the enjoyment of the benefits—often financial—that a reading of potentially experiencing same-sex desire brings, without the risk of discrimination or homophobia. This notion of privilege was echoed by one fan who rejected the idea that a straight person could identify as “queer”. “[B]ecause even if a straight person is ‘non-normative’ in some way,” Lena says, “they still have straight privilege and benefit from being straight based on societal structures of power.” Whilst whiteness as a blank canvas allows for queerness to be imagined at the centre of meaning through visible likeness, it also works to exacerbate and politicise notions of privilege. This was particularly evident when actor and former boy-band member, Nick Jonas, was accused of queerbaiting when he spoke at a vigil for the victims of the shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Moran 2016; Nichols 2016). The day after forty-nine people were killed and fifty-three others were injured at the massacre on June 12, 2016, Jonas spoke outside of the Stonewall Inn in New York City—often referred to as the birthplace of the gay rights movement—and shared his grief and his connection to the LGBTQ community. His privilege was used as evidence of his inauthentic intentions and his identity as a white, straight, cisgender man was used to highlight the apparent distance between himself and the victims. Such distance from the racial, sexual and gender identities of the Pulse victims foreclosed the possibility of authenticity for fans, thus exacerbating criticisms of queerbaiting. Ironically, it is this same whiteness and sexuality that allows fans to initially engage in queer fantasy scenarios.

With regard to privilege, those who employ the term queerbaiting as a form of activism argue that it allows particular celebrities to consolidate and reap the rewards of dedicated niche followings without jeopardising mainstream appeal. This is the point *Pop Sugar* contributor Victor Verdugo (2016) makes with respect to actor James Franco. He writes that Franco enjoys the benefits of a queer image by “appropriating gay culture” yet also avoids experiencing the “full responsibilities of the social implications that come with being a gay man.” S. E. Smith (2014) echoes this argument in their article for *The Daily Dot*, in which they assert that Franco is rewarded for his “daring allyship, without running the risks of punishment for actually being gay.” Smith’s view seems to be in line with Asta and Vacha-Haase’s (2013) study of “straight allies.” They found that a primary motivation for participants’ engagement with LGBTQ activism was appreciation and recognition from others rather than empathy. Other scholarship on straight allies has also emphasised the

theme of “passive” and “active” activism, making note of the difference between the passive social practice of identifying as an ally, and actively engaging in political movements and organised efforts to bring about change. I agree that celebrities may reap benefits for appearing to be an ‘ally.’ The reliance on identity categories to police the ways celebrities market themselves, however, not only inhibits the radical and transformative potential of sexual fluidity but ignores the pleasure that many fans experience in their queer readings. Perhaps the incentive or pressure to commodify the self as a product for audience consumption should be the focus of critique, rather than the celebrities themselves or the fans who are duped by such ‘courting.’

Queerbaiting rests on the existence of a ‘true’ meaning of a text and the queer potential of that meaning. In these celebrity contexts, the existence of a true meaning and those who have access to and knowledge of that meaning is continually questioned, with the “contest of queerbaiting” staged around who has authority to claim knowledge of the authentic textual meaning (see McDermott 2018). As discussed above, previous studies of celebrity and gay fandom, such as those conducted by Dyer and DeAngelis, were not driven to discover the ‘truth’ of a star’s sexuality or persona. Instead, they were interested in how the construction of the celebrity orients gay audiences to them as figures of identification. Such identification relied on the stars’ continued ambiguity, yet deliberate exploitation was never explicitly implied or criticised. Within the context of celebrity queerbaiting, however, the authentic meaning is centred on a person and that person’s sexuality. Therefore, access to that ‘truth,’ whilst debated, lies solely with the celebrity in question, whose authoritative knowledge exacerbates notions of intentionality and exploitation. The search for truth and accountability within sexuality and intentions of celebrities accused of queerbaiting is at the centre of the issue and is key to its influence.

Understandably, then, defences of celebrities accused of queerbaiting either absolve them of intentionality or dismiss any notion of exploitation in their self-marketing. *Towleroad* commentator Charles Pulliam-Moore (2014) argues that the popularity of Nick Jonas with gay men is not the result of intentional homoerotic marketing, but instead a consequence of Jonas working in the age of the “peak hot guy,” in which the male body and male sexuality are more commodified than ever before. Similarly, it is important to note Jonas’ own admission of his intentions to court queer followings. Jonas demonstrates an awareness of such intentionality when speaking of marketing and the construction of his adult image. On the subject of his transition from adolescence to adulthood in his career, Jonas explains: “The word ‘intentional’ is dangerous, but it was about intentionally doing

certain photo shoots and things that would give people a better idea of who I am today as opposed to their first introduction when I was 14” (quoted in Wood 2016). The word “intentional” is dangerous for Jonas because, as we have seen throughout this thesis, intentionality is at the heart of queerbaiting: as a calculated attempt to profit off queer interest, rather than a more ‘pure’ reflection of who a celebrity *truly* is. The foregoing quote also presents a de-queering of his self-sexualisation. Such choices of “certain photo shoots” helped to separate Jonas from his adolescent Disney image but also refuted an actuality argument: of a true homoerotic persona that is queer in some way.

Fans are critically oriented towards celebrities at the centre of mainstream popular and screen culture. The ostensible heterosexuality of these celebrities grants them access to this centre, to which queerbaiting suggests queerness has infiltrated. Yet, the critics of celebrity queerbaiting argue that this impulse of fans to escape from the margins is being exploited. These criticisms, I have argued, reinscribe binary identity labels and focus on the intentions of the celebrities, ultimately criticising what they see as inauthentic motivations to exploit for capitalistic gain. Whilst these criticisms are important in an increasingly commodified culture, perhaps the enjoyment of this queer consumption and indeed the ability to experience fluidity outside of identity labels tied to privilege and access should receive more focus as sites of queer pleasure and deconstruction. Even if celebrities are primarily motivated by the pursuit of profit, this does not erase the queer pleasure involved for their audiences. Queerness may certainly be repackaged and sold to fans; however, it can still provide pleasure and enjoyment even when operating within a context of mass production and consumption.

Conclusion

Henry Abelow noticed a distinct change in the queer political subjectivity of his students in the 1990s. Their rejection or dismissal of queerness situated at the margins of culture demonstrated a shift, influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, in the ways queerness was remembered and celebrated. His students saw themselves in the queer pleasures of Cole Porter’s songs or the camp of movie-musicals. These identifications highlight the complexities of access to texts for queers. However, what provides access whereby queerness can be known and celebrated? How are these identifications and pleasures conceptualised? For Abelow’s students, explicit identity politics was not required for such access. Rather, access was made possible simply by virtue of their desire to see themselves at the centre, rather than at the margins. Abelow was troubled by this

shift. He was troubled by the erasure of the political work that was and continues to be done at the margins. I see a similar orientation towards the centre in contemporary queerbaiting discourse. The power of meaning-making afforded by the position of the centre of the narrative is celebrated by fans. They celebrate queerness by figuring it as normal, central and equivalent to straight characters and stories. However, I observe that this drive to centre queerness and move it away from the margins is not informed by postmodernist and poststructuralist thought as it was for Abelow's students. Rather, contemporary fans involved in queerbaiting critique are primarily motivated by representational identity politics.

For fans, visible likeness equates to identity categories such as gender, race and sexuality. Often, though, assumptions of likeness are made in their representational politics in contradictory ways. One can only 'see' themselves reflected, they suggest, if a character is explicitly gay, lesbian or bisexual. Yet, often this access was also only available through a sense of racial similarity. Gender, however, was only sometimes referenced when criticising the lack of representation, and at other times fans demonstrated cross-gender identifications, such as with *Sherlock*.

Throughout this thesis I have illustrated how the contemporary queer politics of media representation is heavily invested in identity. Such politics can provide useful critiques of the lack of variety and quality in storytelling. However, the significance of identity categories and assumptions of visible likeness obscure the multiplicity of identificatory modes and practices that audiences utilise in their access to texts. The privileging of explicit, visible likeness in accessing texts risks further obscuring the prevalence of whiteness. This chapter has demonstrated how whiteness provides the blank canvas onto which queerness can be projected, imagined and celebrated. Whiteness enables fans to see queerness (and themselves) at the centre of the narrative, in the position of power over meaning-making and as drivers of story. Such whiteness becomes less visible, however, when identification is conceptualised and politically mobilised around certain visible likenesses over others.

Within contemporary queerbaiting discourse, the politics of queer representation is staked on the assumption that increased visibility corresponds to progress, that is, the cultural and social liberation of queers. Yet at the heart of this politics lies a deep investment in the perception of authenticity, a notion that has been rejected by postmodernist and poststructuralist inspired queer theory. Positive queer representation for fans is authentic representation, with authenticity referring to the position of queers within

the text and the intentions of creators. Authentic depictions of queers in media are those in which queers are at the centre of the narrative, driving the story. If queers are ‘more than their sexuality’ and given backstory, development and build-up, they are deemed to be authentic representation. However, only when occupying the centre can queerness in queerbaiting discourse become secondary. What follows from this idea of authenticity is the perception of pure intentions. Creators are seen as intending to depict queers authentically rather than as tokens in order to reap the benefits of having a queer character, without allowing that character to control or even impact the wider story.

Celebrities accused of queerbaiting are similarly bound to criticisms of intentionality. As was demonstrated in the Nick Jonas example; his whiteness furthered perceptions of his privilege and, thus, distance from the queer community and the victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting more specifically. This distance was used as evidence of his inauthentic intentions and therefore his deliberate intention to queerbait. In celebrity queerbaiting, the star’s queerness is the subject of mystery and investigation, largely to locate a site of blame. Fans are invested in working out the ‘truth’ at the centre of their stardom. The perception of same-sex desire becomes the focus of investigation and, ultimately, criticism. Celebrities represent the centre of mainstream popular and screen culture, yet it is the celebrities who are perceived to be straight by mainstream audiences that gain access to this centre by virtue of their straightness. Thus, fans are oriented towards stars to whom they believe have allowed queerness to infiltrate. Celebrity queerbaiting discourse encapsulates an orientation towards the centre of culture that Abelow observed in his students. However, contemporary representational politics has oriented fans away from the margins not via postmodernist and poststructuralist thought of deconstruction and polysemic textual appreciation, but of progressivist politics steeped in notions of identity, privilege and authenticity. Such investments in identity and authenticity by fans are indicative of their profound desire for coherence and legibility. This may be important in their attempt to capture, know and see queerness within the realms of happiness and futurity; however, such drives ultimately narrow the scope of queer possibility.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyse the emergence of the phenomenon of queerbaiting beyond a textual analysis of television shows. Rather than attempt to prove creator intentionality and expose it as an insidious and exploitative industry tactic, I have examined the affective, political dimensions of queerbaiting and implications for wider representational politics. The first chapter traced the history of shifting contexts and conditions that led to queerbaiting. It identified four key historical influences and periods: (1) the emergence of slash fiction and fan communities that centred around slash in the 1970s; (2) the “gay window advertising” strategy and the construction of the gay market from the 1970s to 1990s; (3) the “explosion” of gay and lesbian material on US network television, dubbed “The Gay 90s”; and (4) the advent of the internet and social media in the 2000s and its effect on fandom as a culture, identity and practice. These antecedents to queerbaiting highlight the phenomenon as firmly rooted in shifting discourses around the politicisation of queer media imagery.

With these historical contexts and conditions in mind, I observed that queerbaiting is a distinctly contemporary moment that reflects broader shifts in queer visibility politics and the relationship of audiences to representation. The history of censorship, marketing, and the perception of a “post-closet” (Becker 2007, 2009) climate of queer visibility serve as paratexts that contribute to conceptions, assessments and expectations of queer representation. I argued that the politics of fans are informed and animated by this perception of history as it pertains to queer screen imagery and the political economy of media production. The affective dimension of such politics becomes clear through fans’ deep, emotional responses to queerbaiting and their conception of their relationship to media texts and creators. Despite seemingly operating with an increased level of agency through social media, fans position themselves within this relationship as without agency in the production of queer textual meaning. I observed that this denial of agency enables accusations of blame and exploitation to be projected onto creators. Such affective mobilisation, I argued, highlights a profound shift in the reception of queer subtext or homoerotic imagery on screen. The pleasure that was once available to these fans becomes impossible when authorial intent is re-centred in accusations of false promises, denial and/or deliberate exploitation.

A re-centring of the Author was a prominent theme in chapter two which provided in-depth analysis of the ways in which fans are understanding and mobilising queerness

within queerbaiting debates. I argued that the figure of the Author is located as the site of power over textual meaning within queerbaiting discourse. I observed a shift in the queer political subjectivity of fans whereby the saliency of queerness within representational politics is tied to the intentions and authorisation of the Author. Whilst postmodernist and poststructuralist inspired queer theory aims to deconstruct and problematise identity categories and any notions of authentic truth or meaning, contemporary fans use “queer” to call for diversity in media and as a catchall for the “LGBTIQAA+” community. In this call for diversity, queerness has become objectified in order to locate it with a singular meaning within the primary textual diegesis. Singular and definitively defined queerness enabled a site of ‘evidence’ and blame to emerge. Queerness in this sense corresponded to same-sex desire, rather than the multiplicity of queerness argued for by queer film theorists such as Richard Dyer (1977, 1986, 1993) or Alexander Doty (1993, 1995, 2000). Queerness may seem separated from its deconstructive roots; however, fans did partially reject the notion of sexuality as an immutable aspect of a person. Instead, fans believe that sexuality is subject to change. This is a promising discovery considering the investment that mainstream gay rights movements have had in biological essentialism. Such an understanding of sexuality may reflect what Rob Cover (2012a, 2019a) has argued is a profound impulse to find coherence, legitimacy and authenticity in a multitude of identity categories. I argue that within queerbaiting discourse, this understanding of sexuality fits perfectly with calls for characters to experience same-sex attraction despite previously identifying as heterosexual.

Chapter two identified little room for pleasure in the configuration of queerness within queerbaiting debates. I discovered that to navigate the precarious terrain of inauthentic intentions regarding queer representation, fans argued for an increased level of understanding of the ultimate intentions of the creators for the queer characters. However, I observed that this attempt to distinguish between playful, enjoyable subtext and exploitative queerbaiting is not as evident in practice as many creators do in fact state that characters are indeed heterosexual. In these moments, it is not a lack of communication that causes hostility, but a question of interpretive strategies. Instead, I call for competing discourses within queer readings, with the acknowledgement that various fans experience different affective responses simultaneously.

Despite my call for allowing room for the enjoyment and pleasure of subtext without centring authorial intent, queerbaiting is deeply entangled with notions of trauma and harm. Chapter three explored the affective politics of the child. Responding to the

recurring use of a figure of a queer child, this chapter utilised affect theory and queer scholarship on the politics of the child. The works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991), Lee Edelman (2004) and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) were drawn on to analyse the function and conceptualisation of the queer child in queerbaiting discourse. I found that the queer child is frequently understood as vulnerable due to assumptions that children have no agency and no ability to exercise power, thus rendering them only capable of passive forms of media consumption. They are vulnerable because they are queer in a heteronormative society and powerless because they are seen not to have control over meaning-making or possession of the knowledge of (or the ability to imagine) liveable adult lives as queer. The significance of intelligibility becomes apparent here when queerbaiting is seen as refusing queer children the ability to apprehend these possible happy, queer adulthoods. Cover's extensive work on identity and discourses surrounding queer youth suicidality proved particularly useful here (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2019a, b). He argues that the recent proliferation of identity categories speaks to the impulse for identity coherence, intelligibility and authenticity, where vulnerability and suicidality may result when these are lacking. My analysis of the discourses around queerbaiting supports this claim. This chapter argued that fans utilise the figure of the child to demonstrate the importance of positive representation (the antithesis to queerbaiting) in order to provide for such knowledge of possible adulthoods, and for a coherent, authentic, and imagined queerness embedded in futurity.

This investment in notions of happiness and intelligibility was explored further in chapter four. With respect to conceptions of the queer child as vulnerable and powerless due to a lack of access to imagined happy (queer) futures, I examined the mobilisation of happiness and futurity in the designations of positive and negative representation by fans. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theory of happiness (2010), I explored how fans conceived of positive or good queer representation as queer characters receiving happy endings. Queerbaiting and the bury your gays trope were therefore understood as negative and harmful representation. I argued that queerbaiting discourse is deeply invested in orientations towards that future marked by the promise of happiness. As explored in the previous chapter, this promise is driven by a desire for coherence, intelligibility and authenticity. In Lovelock's analysis of queer YouTubers' coming out videos (2017), he suggests that such narratives of a painful past and the eventual learning to be "happy" and "proud" of one's sexuality serves to reinforce a "proto-homonormative" subject position. I argued that an orientation towards the future, deeply embedded in happiness, serves a

similar function. Contemporary investments in these orientations highlight a queer political subjectivity in which the imperative to transform a painful past into a happy (and productive) queer adulthood is shored up and made possible by positive queer representation. Queerbaiting is thought to be harmful because it appears to stand in the way of this transformation into a “proto-homonormative” subject position. It is seen as shutting down the possibility of a liveable subjectivity grounded in happiness and, therefore, authenticity.

The entanglement of representational politics in this logic of futurity highlights unique temporal crossings within queerbaiting discourse. Expanding upon Evangeline Aguas’ analysis of temporality in queerbaiting (2019), I also analysed the affective, temporal dynamics experienced by fans. As Aguas observes, in the act of decoding past content and analysing present queer media contexts in order to predict future queer content, queerbaiting highlights temporal crossings between past, present and future. What my interviews revealed is that these temporal crossings are informed by the unique vantage point of queers with a history rooted in trauma and injury. The political subjectivity and mobilisation of fans is underpinned by these affective temporal crossings and provided the basis for a discussion of the role of negative affect. Drawing on Heather Love (2009), Michael Snediker (2009), José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Jack Halberstam (2011), this chapter explored the possibility for such an embrace within contemporary politics surrounding queerbaiting. I argued that futurity and queerness need not be mutually exclusive, and that there is indeed space for hope and optimism in politics that position media visibility and representation as significant tools for change. Yet I observed that within contemporary queerbaiting discourse, such negative affect presents a clear disconnect between “queer” as theory and practice.

Building on the work of the previous chapters, chapter five asks why fans are oriented towards certain texts and characters perceived to queerbait, rather than explicitly queer characters. I observed that many characters that are the subject of queerbaiting debates are generally the protagonist of the narrative. I argued that queerbaiting discourse highlights a political subjectivity that desires to see, know and celebrate queerness at the centre, rather than at the margins. Such a centring, I observed, is underpinned by a desire to possess power over meaning-making in textual storytelling and, within the discourse of celebrity queerbaiting, to possess influence over mainstream popular culture. I argued that such a centre is entangled in whiteness.

Drawing on critical queer and race theories, I highlighted how queerbaiting presents queerness deeply entangled in racial politics. I argued that within queerbaiting debates, whiteness acts as a blank canvas upon/from which queerness is imagined and read. Whiteness functions as the mode through which notions of subversion, transgression and sexual play can flourish. I agreed with theorists who question and problematise the characterisation of fandom as a utopian site of radical and queer play by pointing to the overwhelming whiteness of texts and racism of some fans. I disagreed, however, with the conceptualising of ‘access’ to texts only existing through visible racial likeness. This thesis has demonstrated that fans engage in a multitude of identifications with texts, often crossing gender, sexual and racial categories. I argued that access, and likeness for that matter, is contradictory, oscillating and constantly shifting. Whilst pointing out racial disparity and exclusion in some fan spaces of people of colour is important and necessary, relying on a conceptualisation of access as only existing via perceived racial likeness closes off the multitude of identificatory practices in which fans engage.

The notion of likeness was particularly significant to the phenomenon of celebrity queerbaiting. Drawing on Richard Dyer (1986) and Michael DeAngelis’ (2001) work on stardom and John Mercer’s (2013) theorisation of the male sex symbol, I observed that likeness was similarly crucial to the identification of fans with celebrities. Yet, as previously discussed, ‘likeness’ was not immutably linked to identity categorisations such as race or gender. I argued in this concluding chapter that celebrity queerbaiting highlights a contemporary political subjectivity in which queerness is embodied at the centre of meaning and culture. In this centre, I observed that queerness became deeply embedded in identity politics and notions of authenticity. By focusing on the intentions of celebrities in an attempt to locate the ‘truth’ of their sexuality and, therefore, blame, fans reinscribe binaries of sexuality that leave little room for fluidity of desire or behaviour. I acknowledged the existence of potential exploitation of queer audiences and consumers through attempts to capitalise on the ‘pink dollar,’ furthering their positioning as consumer subjects rather than social subjects. Nonetheless, the punitive culture of representational politics, I argued, sees sexual fluidity almost impossible to exist without accusation and criticism of perceived inauthentic intentions. Criticisms of exploitation are important; however, here I called for room for celebrities to be able to explore sexual and gender relations, sensibilities and signifiers that do not necessarily conform to traditional standards of heterosexuality and femininity or masculinity. Such explorations are potentially useful for contemporary representational politics that aims to undermine exclusionary and

hierarchical gender and sexual norms. Celebrity queerbaiting discourse ultimately presents a refiguring of identity politics. Within such politics, I proposed that the impulse to make queerness legible, authentic, and coherent reinscribed punitive categorisations through focusing on intentionality and capitalistic exploitation, rather than viewing these acts as a potential site of queer pleasure and deconstruction. Such an imperative of legible, authentic and coherent queerness domesticates and narrows the scope of queer possibility.

This seeming conflict between pleasure and criticism has been a consistent challenge throughout my research. My training in queer studies and media analysis encourages me to be sceptical and critical of identity politics and images of queers in media as liberation. Throughout this thesis I have attempted to be respectful in the acknowledgement of the harm that fans feel has been caused by queerbaiting, and their beliefs about creator intentionality and exploitation. Without dismissing their beliefs and experiences I have attempted to provide a critical inquiry into the performativity of queerbaiting critique and the implications that underpin such discourse. Similarly, I have been careful not to appear to support some creators outright in their dismissal or denial of queerbaiting accusations and criticisms. Rather, my intentions have been to analyse discourses and assumptions underpinning queerbaiting in order to explore contemporary politics of identity, affect and representation.

By interviewing fans, I was able to learn a great deal about their politics, experiences and feelings. Such insight could not have been gained through only an analysis of discussions on fan forums or social media sites. However, I certainly recognise that this method has its limitations. Being interviewed by a researcher may have caused some participants to be hesitant to share particular beliefs or experiences, which may have been exacerbated by being interviewed by a man. Further, the whiteness of the participants was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis but is worth revisiting. All but one participant identified as Caucasian/white. Whilst many of the white participants did speak about the importance of racial diversity in queer representation, perhaps the findings would have more focus on the experiences of fans of colour specifically, had more participants not been white. Nevertheless, the discoveries made and the analysis conducted in this thesis provide important insights into contemporary politics surrounding queer representation and configurations of and investments in identity and affect.

The future of media representation

This thesis speaks to the ever-shifting relationship between audiences and queer media, with queer subjects becoming increasingly visible in the political and cultural sphere. This heightened visibility is partly due to the increased commodification and commercialisation of especially gay cultures. Such visibility, however, must not be equated to social or political liberation, as we saw in chapter one. Michael DeAngelis writes of the increased visibility and acknowledgement of non-heterosexual identities as being just as much the result of the commercialisation of gay culture as from a broadening acceptance of homosexuality: “As an alternative subcultural identity solidified into something openly recognizable by the mainstream, homosexuality was also transformed into an entity that could be readily targeted, packaged, and marketed” (2001, 126). The visibility of queerness in mainstream culture, therefore, must be examined with caution and the acknowledgment of the ongoing effects of commodification. As John Champagne writes, “If our sexual subjectivities are increasingly purchased as commodities, we need to develop a variety of strategies to resist this form of subjection—should it ultimately lead to a decrease in our freedom to fabricate a queer self. The relationship between fandom and commodification, however, is a complicated one” (2003, 160). Indeed, the relationship is complex. This thesis has aimed to venture into this complicated terrain by asking how fans are fabricating a queer self within the discourse of queerbaiting. The queer subjectivity of fans is inextricably entangled with a refigured identity politics mobilised around media visibility and centring on authorial intent. Identity for fans operates through affective responses and investments in queer representation, where such identities serve as political bases for their accusations, their ability to read and know queerness, and their conceptualisations of queerness on screen. Their investments in identity within queerbaiting critique are further embedded in their desire for authenticity and legibility of queerness on screen. Such drive is evident in their investments in futurity, happiness and knowledge of possible, imagined and coherently queer adulthoods. Representation, for these fans, is a means to acquire such coherence. Queerbaiting is thus seen as closing off possibilities for a legible and knowable happy, queer future.

Early scholarly critique of heteronormative and homonormative media called for an intervention into the problematic or otherwise non-existent depictions of queers and to hold media creators to account. Doty (1993, 2000), for example, called for an understanding of queerness as existing within explicit texts of mainstream Hollywood rather than through connotation or subtextual references. He encouraged audiences to resist

seeing queerness as always secondary to the ‘real’ meaning of a text. Queerbaiting discourse, however, demonstrates a shift in standards expected of queer characters and narratives. I argue that queerbaiting politics presents new investments in a particular type of explicit queerness, shored up in futurity politics and centred on authorial intent.

Despite these new investments, contemporary queerbaiting critics share with earlier slash fans and scholarly interventions into heteronormative media a desire for more visible queerness on screen. I agree with their desire to hold media creators to account and to call for a greater diversity of stories being told. Doty warned against only seeing, imagining and enjoying queerness in subtext, in the “closet of connotation.” Critics of queerbaiting and many of the fans cited in this thesis have done well to intervene into this closeting. I understand the desire of some fans for characters to say the word “gay,” “lesbian” or “bisexual,” or to explicitly state their same-sex desire on screen. However, in reality, queerness is not always presented in such explicit terms. Of course, I see the pleasures in such explicitness, but I also see the pleasures in subtlety, in not fully grasping queerness. I share the enjoyment of fans in queer representation. These pleasures are what first brought me to media studies as a university student. At the same time, we must not excuse media creators for “wanting to have their cake and eat it too” (Bridges 2018, 119). I respect the need for coherence and legibility for queer people, and acknowledge the importance of questioning and criticising media creators for wanting to appear diverse without representing any openly queer characters.

Calling for more diverse queer stories and modes of storytelling is undoubtedly a worthwhile endeavour. There are, however, a variety of unfortunate strategies employed by queerbaiting critics. The focus on authorial intent and exploitation, the re-essentialising of identities, and the diminishing of agency work to narrow the scope of queer imagination, identification and pleasure. Such a narrowing is exclusionary and, ironically, closes off a multitude of queer possibilities for future generations. If queerbaiting critique inevitably re-centre the figure of the Author, how then can a queer fan enjoy the coded queerness of a text or celebrity within this contemporary media climate? Are those that refuse to believe that queerness is merely bait reinforcing this exploitative system?

Queerness, according to queerbaiting critics, is positioned as a product marketed and sold to queer fans in an exploitative and ultimately dishonest way. Queerness has long been reappropriated, repackaged and repurposed for the consumer, both as an edgy product for crossover appeal and purportedly to exploit the needs and desires of queer viewers to see themselves reflected on screen. The *Calvin Klein* controversy referenced at the

beginning of this thesis highlights the complicated relationship between queer representational politics and consumerism. When marketing and capitalistic gain are explicitly linked to intentions of those deemed to queerbait, accusations of exploitation and inauthentic motivations become all the more difficult to evade. Perhaps the real threat facing queer fandom, and indeed queerness in general, is not those who are accused of queerbaiting, but the commodification of queerness itself.

This thesis calls for a greater embrace of a multiplicity of pleasures in queer imagery and a continued que(e)rying of assumptions made in identity-based representational politics. Future productive political engagements with media must continue to question and critique creators without recuperating identity categories as bases for identification, interpretation, and political criticism. They must call for more types and modes of queerness in media without diminishing the pleasure that some fans experience. An honest account of agency and identificatory practices, moreover, will allow for queerness to exist and flourish in a multitude of ways.

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Appendix A



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Participant Information Statement

1. Who is the researcher?

My name is Michael McDermott and I am a Ph.D. student in Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCShS) at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. My supervisors are Dr. Steven Angelides and Dr. Andrea Waling. My Ph.D. candidature is sponsored by La Trobe University.

2. What are the aims of this research?

Although queerbaiting has a significant presence in online discussions amongst fans, it has yet to be the subject of academic inquiry. This project will observe the phenomenon of queerbaiting in order to understand why it has emerged as a named phenomenon and what this means for contemporary relations between fans and creators as well as the current state of queer representation in the media.

3. What does this research involve?

The research involves interviewing fans of television shows that are at the centre of debates/discussions around queerbaiting. In order to participate in this research project, you must be aged 18 years or above. The interviews will be approximately 1 hour and take place via an instant messaging service such as Skype strictly using the chat feature, no audio or video. Participants will be asked questions about their involvement with their fan community and their opinions about various debates around queerbaiting.

4. How will the data from your interview be used?

The data will be used for a PhD thesis (hard and/or electronic copy) which will be made publicly available through La Trobe University's library. Other possibly publicly available publications include book (hard copy), academic journal articles (hard and/or electronic copy) and conference papers (hard and/or electronic copy). The anonymity of participants will be maintained in all publications.

5. How will confidentiality be managed?

To protect your privacy and confidentiality, names will remain anonymous. All data will be de-identified when downloaded and will subsequently remain completely anonymous when included in the thesis. The participant will be removed from the Skype contact list once the interview has been completed, further communication can be had via email.

6. How will the data be stored and destroyed?

Data will be stored in a password protected computer in a locked location. Storage of the printed materials after completion of this research will adhere to the La Trobe University regulations and kept on University premises in a locked store room for a minimum of 5 years, after which it will be securely destroyed. The data saved on the computer will be deleted after the completion of my Ph.D.

7. What are the possible benefits of the project?

While participants may not receive any direct benefit from this study, the findings will provide new insights into the phenomenon of queerbaiting, including fan-creator relations and contemporary queer representation in the media. This information will be beneficial because it will involve the perspective of various fans.

8. Issues of consent and withdrawal of consent.

If you agree to be interviewed, please complete the short survey that is also attached, and email it to me. Once your eligibility to be interviewed has been confirmed, I will send you a consent form to sign and we will organize a time for the interview to take place. You may elect to withdraw your consent without giving any reason and will suffer no disadvantage as a result, provided you do so within two weeks of the conclusion of data collection. Owners who choose to withdraw from the research are asked to send me an email to withdraw with a signed copy of the withdrawal of consent form within two weeks after the interview has been completed. There are no negative implications for withdrawing from this study. Data from the interview will then be removed and destroyed. Consent and withdrawal forms will be retained. After this date, it will not be possible to remove or destroy data as analysis will have proceeded. This research has received La Trobe University ethics approval <S17-187>.

ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS

If you have any complaints or concerns about your participation in the study that the researcher has not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Senior Human Ethics Officer, Ethics and Integrity, Research Office, La Trobe University, Victoria, 3086 (P: 03 9479 1443, E: humanethics@latrobe.edu.au). Please quote the application reference number: S17-187.

Michael McDermott E-mail: michael.mcdermott24@gmail.com

If you have any queries or complaints that I have not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the project supervisors:

Dr Steven Angelides E-mail: s.angelides@latrobe.edu.au

Dr Andrea Waling E-mail: a.waling@latrobe.edu.au

Or, if they are unable to answer your questions to your satisfaction, you may contact:

The Secretary, Human Ethics Committee, Research Services
La Trobe University, Victoria, 3086 Australia
P: +61 3 9479 1443
E-mail: humanethics@latrobe.edu.au

Appendix B

Advertisement Text – Queerbaiting: A Study on Contemporary Audiences and Queer Media

Participants wanted for online interviews

Are you aged 18 years or above and a fan of a TV show that you believe is or has engaged in queerbaiting? Do you actively participate in the fan community by engaging in online discussions, attending fan conventions, producing fan/slash-fiction?

You're invited to take part in a research project that seeks to understand fans' thoughts and opinions on queerbaiting. Conversations with the researcher will take place online via an instant messaging service (e.g. Skype) using the chat feature (instant messaging only, no video or audio).

If you would like to be involved please visit www.queerbaitingproject.wordpress.com for more information.

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