



NEW QUEER TELEVISION

**FROM MARGINALIZATION TO
MAINSTREAMIFICATION**

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Introduction

The Evolving Landscape of Queer Television

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In late 2019 and early 2020, the project from which this edited collection came to be was wildly different. Originally, we envisaged a series of live events which brought together a range of academics and activists for the examination of queer culture as it currently exists. These events grew from a consistent observation among us that queer scholarship needed a new direction: that it could sometimes feel stuck in a rut, rehearsing familiar arguments that felt out of sync with the richness and creativity of contemporary queer cultural artefacts and the relations of production, consumption, fandom and community they generate. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global closures dashed these ideas, but not the momentum we had already gathered in the development of a project. Rather than let that energy go to waste, we regrouped and decided to narrow our focus to the media that we often found ourselves returning to when discussing this project: television.

This revision turned into a call for papers for a project on New Queer Television, which sought out papers examining how queer representation on the small screen has changed. In turn, we asked that contributors work to re-examine the positions that queer subjects are often put into in existent queer scholarly work, which we argue is out of joint with those televisual representations in question. We received a staggering number of abstracts for this project, leaving us with an absolute wealth of uncharted queer televisual territory. It was immediately clear that the knowledge we were producing for a new study of queer television was a deeply resonant and much-needed area of expansion. From this initial project idea, we have produced a double special issue for *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* as well as this book, which collects cutting-edge theoretical perspectives

and shorter interventions on a whole host of queer television from the past decade. Though both the special issue and this collection emerged from this same well, their respective scopes are different and, as we have endeavoured, complementary.

One of the signifiers of this project is its focus on scripted television. This focus centres on an area of research that seems to have been forgotten amidst the formidable empire of queer reality TV and critical writing on it. This is not to deny the importance of reality television in shaping the scholarly perspectives showcased in this volume. In *Reality TV and Queer Identities*, Michael Lovelock foregrounds his discussion of the genre by stating that ‘reality television has been one of the most prolific spaces of queer representation in Anglo-American popular media since the beginning of the twenty-first century’ (2019: 3). Reality TV, he writes, is ‘an intricate and productive cultural form, one which has offered up a diverse range of potential subject positions from which to live out differences to the heterosexual and cisgender norms’ (2019: 4). It is not difficult to locate the evidence for this statement; long-running reality competition series such as *America’s Next Top Model* (ANTM) (2003–18) and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009–present) have carved out spaces for LGBTQ+ representation in two reality empires which span multiple decades and territories. ANTM host, Tyra Banks, began to make a point of how the show had spread to ‘over 110 countries’ (beginning in cycle eight, 2007), while *Drag Race*, which modelled itself off ANTM success, is, at the time of writing, either airing or in production in sixteen countries. Whilst *Drag Race* features almost exclusively queer contestants, ANTM also has a strong track record of providing a space for queer and trans bodies. From the first cycle of ANTM (2003), there has been a queer presence on the show, ranging from cycle one’s open and proud lesbian contestant Ebony Emecca Haith to cycle five’s (2005) Kimberly Lynn Stolz’s iconic lesbian limousine kiss. This content has not always been positive. We need to look no further than cycle eleven’s (2008) treatment of trans contestant Isis King whose, nevertheless groundbreaking, inclusion in the show was treated with constant transphobic bullying and rhetoric from other contestants and the judges. As we have already noted, ANTM’s history with transgender contestants is problematic at best, while *Drag Race*’s host, RuPaul, has only begun admitting trans contestants to the show in the past few years. These shifts in the culture of Reality TV are mirrored in their scripted televisual counterpoints. If, continuing to draw on Lovelock, we accept that ‘it is precisely through media that [audiences] come to know LGBTQ identities as recognisable and meaningful formations of sexuality and gender’ then we have an obligation to understand just exactly what this media is portraying, representing and centring as dominant cultural hegemonies (2019: 14–15).

We would argue New Queer Television goes beyond the constraints of ‘reality’ to narrative works that reshape ideas of ‘authenticity’. For example, past scripted

television has relied heavily on ‘coming out’ moments that are episodic ‘reveals’ before the show returns to its serialized content that returns this queerness to the background. In *Lesbians on Television*, Kate McNicholas Smith writes that ‘a normative account of the ideal queer subject and their trajectory from shame and silence to pride and visibility emerges’ (2020: 127). Here, we can see the existing narrative tropes at play in queer TV though, like McNicholas Smith, we can acknowledge and understand that these types of plotlines link to the implicit hetero-facing audience members, thus reaffirming queer visibility as a mode of being that has its traditions in appealing to heterosexual or ‘straight’ audiences. American sitcom *Ellen* had the eponymous character come out in the season four episode ‘The Puppy Episode’ (1997) (alongside the lead star, Ellen DeGeneres, before being swiftly cancelled). Shows that were committed to representing LGBTQ+ identities, such as *Queer As Folk* (1999–2000) and *The L Word* (2004–09), were known as ‘gay’ shows and had a bad habit of presenting almost exclusively white queer bodies (*Queer As Folk* and *The L Word*), femme lesbians (*The L Word*) and negative depictions of transgender characters, made aggressive through gender-confirming medication (*The L Word*). Not only have these shows received some of the most scholarly attention in terms of scripted queer TV, but the arguments can be summarized as we stated earlier, suggesting that the most palatable form of queerness aligns with hegemonies of whiteness and normative gender markers.

Throughout this edited collection, we intend to draw attention to representations of queerness as it appears in manifold ways in popular television. Queer critics and queer theory as a whole have focused on queer cultural production as it originates from marginal and closeted spaces (Sedgwick 1990; Halberstam 2011). These landmark scholars have cemented a foundational understanding of queerness that informs many of the papers in this volume. However, we argue that there is a need for scholarship that contends not only with issues of marginalization but with the fresh challenges engendered by mainstreamification. Indeed, it may be more fruitful to consider how marginal identities, when afforded a central focus – when mainstreamed – offer a series of challenges to both the extant scholarly work and to the expectations viewers place on mainstream television. Consider, for example, *Pose* (2018–21) as a prestige television show and work in queer televisual titan Ryan Murphy’s oeuvre which focuses predominantly on the lives of trans women of colour in the New York City ballroom scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here, working-class, Black, trans femininity is situated within a cultural mainstream, by virtue of the show’s production values, time slot and producer credits. Rather than be rendered into a form digestible to a wider audience, however, the show entangles the audience in a compelling web of experiences and tableaux. Rather than fixate on the spectacle of their transness, as a marginal model might encourage, such mainstreamed representations position

trans characters, stars and producers in an intersectional constellation with which the audience must reckon.

The chapters herein will present a broad variety of queer identities from across a range of televisual genres and shows in an effort to negotiate and reconsider the marginalization of queerness in the twenty-first century. Across these chapters, we seek to showcase work that pays attention to the complexity of mainstream queer identities and representations. This is necessary, we argue, because there is a tendency in some queer critical spaces to collapse mainstreamification with palatability for cisheteronormative audiences through processes of homonormativity and appropriation. 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 constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’ (2002: 179). In this sense, homonormativity then becomes an extension of heteronormativity with the only singular difference being sexual desire. As the editors of this collection, we want to show queerness as something that pushes beyond this boundary of sexuality as the pinnacle of deviance on screen; to avoid homonormative pitfalls, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the cultures of queerness that exist around and in conjunction with sex and sexuality as well.

McNicholas Smith acknowledges the visuals of working-class queerness, specifically lesbianism, in her reading of Sophie (Brooke Vincent) and Sian’s (Sacha Parkinson) wedding on *Coronation Street* (1960–present: the wedding aired in 2011). McNicholas Smith draws on the generic conventions of the soap opera to suggest that the introduction of these characters is ‘particularly significant, as the lesbian figure is mobilized through its fantasy of “everyday” Britain’ (2020: 103). Like the reality TV that we discussed earlier, soaps, longevity and broadcast on major networks affords them a particular kind of authenticity, in which they are assumed to accurately reflect the values of the nation (*Coronation Street*, incidentally, has produced over 10,000 episodes). Indeed, McNicholas Smith highlights the ways in which these lesbian characters challenge and ‘re-animate’ the figure of the ‘lipstick lesbian’ and become the ‘decoded “lesbian normal” of new queer visibility’ (2020: 106). Here, we can see how queer visibility also absorbs cultural signs from mainstream culture in a way that challenges cultural hegemony. These queer images can both appropriate culture while simultaneously being appropriated by cultures. So, while the dangers of appropriation and commodification remain a concern, McNicholas Smith concludes that nevertheless

there is power in these popular sites and the pleasures and possibilities they mobilise [...] in the resilience and creativity of fandoms, as they move, make and re-make

representations across multiple sites, intervene in the limits of visibility, and open up forms of intimacy and identification.

(2020: 168)

To examine these relations as they manifest within popular culture, it is, therefore, necessary to adopt a nondualistic approach, considering queer cultures in terms of the 'both/and'. This set of productive tensions around power, representation, pleasure and consumption constitutes a key focus of this volume.

Using this complex critical model, we are then able to explore queer television productions with a new lens. Queerness is represented across a multitude of genres in multiple ways: from the sumptuously displayed events in the drama *Pose* (2018–21), the fresh depictions of gender nonconformity in *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017–present), lesbianism and gender diversity in children's animated fantasy show *She-Ra* (2018–20), and the queer discourses emergent from the hugely popular Chinese television show *The Untamed* (2019). These dynamic representations of queer identities in popular media demand an updated articulation of those foundational arguments concerning sexualities and gender identities at the margins. Sara Ahmed's arguments in *Queer Phenomenology* help illustrate this updated articulation. When she writes about orientation, Ahmed compares sexual orientation with a geographical definition of 'orientation', drawing out an examination of the process of orientation as one of turning:

to become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must 'turn away' from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant.

(Ahmed 2006: 21)

If we replace 'straight' with 'mainstream', what is then drawn out of mainstreamed representations of varied sexualities and gender identities is a series of questions about what those representations cause us to turn towards. Put simply, what does a mainstreamed vision of Black trans womanhood as depicted in *Pose*, or a mainstreamed vision of Latina lesbianism as in *Vida*, encourage our critical eyes to also turn towards when these orientations proliferate on the small screen?

By focusing on queer representation in contemporary popular television, then this edited collection draws attention to how the mainstreamification of queer identities has crafted a dynamic field in which a wide variety of queer identities are made visible. Paying close attention to mainstream queer television challenges the assumption that such mainstreamification necessitates being subsumed by the cisheteropatriarchy. Therefore, our project argues the converse: that heteronormative

assumptions are outdated and new queer representations lay the groundwork for filling gaps that queer criticism has left open.

The collection is divided into six parts, aligning chapters and shorter interventions to three thematic foci in ways which demonstrate the incredible variance of queer media texts, scholarly discussions thereof and audience positioning at play in this evolving field. These parts examine dramatic realities, paratextual politics and generic possibilities. The combination of chapters and short thought pieces allows in-depth examinations of key televisual milestones for queer representations as well as focused critical developments in television studies. The longer chapters provide deeper insight into new theoretical ground, while the thought pieces address the cultural impact of shows that would otherwise be lost under the deluge of programming schedules across terrestrial, cable and digital networks.

This varied approach enables a heterogeneous range of theoretical and methodological approaches. The writing collected in this volume provides a snapshot of the current ‘moment’ in queer criticism, but a moment that both extends a rich intellectual history in intersectional queer theory and encourages future possibilities. In focusing on recent scripted television, these pieces make critical manoeuvres built upon the foundation of key critics that allow us to explore new landscapes in queer studies. With all this in mind, we constructed the collection’s parts to provide a range of studies that address each of these elements.

The three chapters of Part I, ‘Dramatic Realities’, and the accompanying two thought pieces in Part 2 lead us into the rich offerings of the collection. To begin, we have Sam Hunter’s chapter ‘*Love, Victor* and the Utopian Function of Networking Queer Identity Work’ which examines the formation of young queer identities in the digital age using *Love, Victor* as a case study. Hunter draws attention to the labour involved in such identity formation and considers how this is mediated through digital platforms such as Instagram direct messages between Victor and Simon. Hunter then situates this as something which challenges conventional set-ups in queer storylines, specifically those narrative beats which see the newly queer character leave their queerphobic environment and escape to the metropolis – so often figured as a queer utopia. Networking queer identity challenges this, in Hunter’s chapter, through a diffusion of queer presence across geographic regions and a betrayal of trust in *Love, Victor* which sees Victor be unwittingly outed as a consequence of what networking can hide: that secrets can be shared.

Daphne Gershon’s ‘Striking Poses of Possibility: Exploring the Transgressive Imaginations of The Series *Pose* and Its Promotional Posters’ extends the possibilities of queer representational theory, examining how *Pose* and its associated paratexts constitute a productive reworking of images of spectacular femininity. By paying close attention to these glamorous and celebratory star texts, which separate their subjects from the queer context of the ball and realign them with star

images, she argues, we gain a rich understanding of the way queer media navigates the tricky terrain between the commercial and the transgressive. In presenting a multifaceted and diverse archive of trans femininity, she suggests, *Pose's* media campaigns interrupt and interrogate the marginalization and pathologizing of trans women in mainstream culture.

The final chapter in Part I, Laura Stamm's "'Que soy marimacha': *Vida's* Queer Inheritance', considers queer inheritance as an allegory for the discursive histories between queerness and feminism. Stamm's chapter examines the Latinx cultures apparent in *Vida* (2018–20) as a means of drawing on how community and generational legacies shape queer identities. Drawing further on the gentrification present in the series, Stamm makes key connections between lesbian cultures onscreen as mirroring the gentrification that has had a staggering impact on the livelihood of lesbian spaces. Closing out the main chapters of the collection, Stamm's work provides key and critical insights into intersectional lesbian queerness.

The first of our two thought pieces for Part II, Sarah E. S. Sinwell's "'You Cannot Put a Fire Out": Revisiting Queer Female Histories in *Dickinson*' captures how queer female histories are allowed to merge past and present on television. Sinwell's work argues that contemporary period television allows us to reimagine these histories. Closing Part II is Timo Thelen's 'Pushing "LGBT-Friendliness" into Japanese Television: A Case Study of *My Brother's Husband*'. Here, Thelen situates the realism of *My Brother's Husband* (2018) against the real-world LGBTQIA+ politics of roughly contemporaneous Japan. Noting how Japan pushes a cultural narrative of vague openness and queer acceptance without necessarily providing adequate legal and social protections, Thelen finds mirrored in the show a figuration of the queer character as an other who eventually leaves Japan. In doing so, this final thought piece nicely demonstrates that the dramatized realities we see on screen are neither as simple nor as clear-cut as they might at first appear.

Part III, 'Paratextual Politics', encompasses three chapters and works together with the one thought piece in Part IV to examine the different ways paratext informs how audiences engage with and approach texts. The essays identify across them a set of tensions which are pertinent to how we think about paratextual material in relation to the overall quality of a show's queer representation.

Alex Xanthoudakis and Tvine Donabedian's chapter, 'You Don't Get Points for Paratext: The Precarity of Queer Representation in *Good Omens*' examines an array of fan interactions with Neil Gaiman in response to the 2019 televisual adaptation of the 1990 novel *Good Omens*. Xanthoudakis and Donabedian establish paratexts as a key thread of this collection, by drawing attention to how Gaiman's position as an author/auteur of the text affords him a position by which he can paratextually negotiate queer representation in the show. Their argument

centres on how Gaiman never quite confirms or denies queer readings of *Good Omens* (2019), and considers how this operates as a tacit attempt to retain broad appeal for the programme. Throughout their examination, Xanthoudakis and Donabedian assert that creator-produced paratext ought to act as a site for the defence and celebration of queer love, as opposed to one in which queer representation is constantly negotiated.

Roxanne Tan's 'Soulmates and Brotherhood: Homosociality and Homosexuality in the Chinese Web Series, *The Untamed*' offers a counterpoint to Xanthoudakis and Donabedian's chapter by drawing attention to the significance of transnational contexts to how we understand paratextual politics. Tan identifies a series of tensions between state censorship and consumer demands as part of the paratextual context of Chinese media text productions. Positioning these as a contextual backdrop, Tan then examines *The Untamed* (2019) and how the show negotiates queer representation. Against Xanthoudakis and Donabedian's chapter, Tan argues a case for indirect queerness, be it subtextual, paratextual or a combination thereof. With reference to fans' media literacy, this chapter helps illustrate that queerness outside of unambiguous textual canon remains a viable, useful and valid form of queer representation.

In 'Retrospective Queering: LGBTQ Representation in *The Legend of Korra* Television Series and Comics', Sarah Busch considers paratextual media in and related to the *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012–14) series and other texts set within this universe to discuss the extent to which its characters are queered retrospectively. Busch raises significant points for considering the politics of paratextual material by pointing out how interacting with *The Legend of Korra*'s comics, novels and creator interviews edits audience interactions with the core media text. In this case, Busch argues, the paratextual material helps make more subtle queer cues, like character interactions and dress, intelligible to the audience. In drawing attention to how paratextual material alters the subject's view of a text, this chapter shows that queer material is embedded in the core text and can be teased out more obviously, thanks to the global eye afforded via a retrospective gaze.

Finally, Colleen Etman's 'For the Honour of Gayskull: Why Queer Love Saving the Universe in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* Matters' closes out Part IV with a thought piece that crystallizes the paratextual discussions raised and examined in the Part III's main chapters. Etman draws on multiple interviews with show creator Nate (ND) Stevenson, which illustrate his desire to remake *She-Ra* in a manner which 'further[s] the gay agenda'. Here, paratextual and core textual material align in their representations and aims, figuring the creator as sensitive to queer representation, eliciting a successful activist sensibility from this alignment.

Part V, ‘Generic Possibilities’, encompasses three essays and together with the two thought pieces in Part VI works with genre conventions to examine how specific tropes and fantastical settings contribute to expressions of queerness on contemporary television. The parts consider how genre play allots wider possibilities within the queer televisual narrative.

Dawn Stobbart’s “‘Not Just a Southern Pansy, Sergeant. THE Southern Pansy’: *Good Omen*’s Queer Representation” opens Part V with an argument concerning the histories of both queer coding and queerbaiting. Stobbart explores the histories of production surrounding the Motion Picture Production (Hays) Code and the ways in which it had a radiating effect on screen narratives. Using the television series *Good Omens* (2019), Stobbart deftly weaves in genre conventions by acknowledging that the series leads (Crowley and Aziraphale) are respectively a demon and an angel, canonically ‘sexless’ beings. Stobbart uses this reasoning to suggest that there is a keen fluidity within genre screen studies that relies both on the narrative ‘canon’ and audience awareness of the actors’ genders. This, Stobbart argues, is how the text is able to produce a narrative of queer love.

Following Stobbart, Yaghma Kaby examines the *American Gods* (2017–21) adaptation in “‘Granting Wishes’: Representing Queerness in *American Gods*’. Here, she argues for approaching queer texts through a kinaesthetic lens as a means of synthesizing the queer body through mobility and movement. Kaby uses this framework to discuss instances of physical touch. She presents the fantastical genre as one that can function as both transgressive and ambivalent, tying this to how the men’s Muslim identities seemingly become secondary to their queer ones. This then blossoms into a closer examination of gay masculinities and the ways in which Whiteness facilitates heterosexual comfort in representations of queerness on television.

Harold Bosstick’s “‘It’s Called Acting! That’s the Real Magic Here’: *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*’s Nonbinary Character Double Trouble as Lens for Intersection of Identity, Performativity and Acting” examines the theatrical and performative side of genre conventions through the character of Double Trouble (voiced by Jacob Tobia) in the fourth series of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–20). Bosstick’s work examines the generic tropes of theatricality and how acting is used to explore gender performance in *She-Ra*.

The last chapter in Part V is Dany Girard’s “‘Those Are the Worst Jobs on the Ship’: *Star Trek: Lower Decks* and the Radical Queer Utopia’, which applies the theoretical lens of queer failure to the character of Beckett Mariner (Tawny Newsome) in *Star Trek: Lower Decks* (2020–present). Girard’s work argues that Mariner’s queerness in the show is presented through her deviance in relation to the homonormative establishment of the Starship *Cerritos*. They argue that

Lower Decks exists in a space of queer utopia, which actively challenges capitalist landscapes.

The thought pieces contributed by Carey Millsap-Spears and Brecken Hunter close the volume by highlighting the issues at hand in queer representation in genre television. Starting with Millsap-Spears' 'De-Fanged Queerness in *Dracula* Reimagined', we find an exploration of the transgressive nature of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and the two recent television adaptations of the novel: *Dracula* (NBC/SKY, 2014) and *Dracula* (BBC, 2020). Millsap-Spears argues that the titular character's bisexuality is lost in both of these recent adaptations. Conversely, Hunter's 'Claws & Queer Fantasy: The Queer Power of Contemporary Television Narrative' crystallizes the hopeful and pleasurable possibilities which genre television makes available to queer representation. Here, he examines the TNT show *Claws* (2017–22) and the ways in which it uses the musical episode to open up multiple layers of queer potential on television.

Through these parts, we see the central concerns of the wider volume. Part I and II's firm rooting in realist conventions enables an examination of fictionalized representations of the lived experience of queerness in the present moment. We find that these chapters illustrate the variety of intersectional experiences and the ways in which queer representations rely on and expand intersectional identities. In addition to this, a focus on intersectional queer identities carves out space for the extensions to queer theory discussed previously, as there has been a hyperfocus on specifically White media in foundational scholarship. Such a discussion begins with Stamm's repeated assertion for the recognition of Latin contributions to queer scholarship in her chapter on *Vida*. Likewise, paratextual concerns pervade each part, with Gershon's chapter starting this thread, before the Parts III and IV engage in a thorough examination of the complexities within paratextual possibilities. These concerns seep into the Part V's chapter on *Good Omens*, which speaks back to the discussions in the Part III's chapter on this show. Complementing this, Parts V and VI's focus on generic possibilities allows us to explore alternative figurations of queerness, such as in Girard's chapter on *Lower Decks*. To conclude the book as such, we push beyond lived realities to imagined queer futurities and the possibilities therein.

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