

Alternative Readings and Affective Economies:  
Toward Lesbian-Identified Resources  
for Building Media-Engaged Counterpublic Communities

A Thesis Submitted to the  
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Master of Arts Degree  
in the Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies Program  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother. I told you I would get this finished.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Marie Lovrod, whose warm encouragement and compassionate mentorship during this process allowed me to carry on even under the most difficult circumstances. Without her support, this work would not have been possible.

I am grateful also to those I had the pleasure of working with during the completion of this research. This includes the members of my Advisory Committee, whose feedback was essential to the project's refinement; the members of my cohort who offered their services as safety monitors, allowing me to complete all interviews in a timely manner; and finally, the volunteers themselves, whose stories were my inspiration.

I am thankful for my mother and brother for providing so much material and spiritual support over the course of my academic career, and I am thankful for my closest friends, Eris, Lianett, Erin, and Laura, who were always there to provide both encouragement and distraction whenever I was feeling overwhelmed.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that this thesis was written on Treaty Six Territory and the Homeland of the Métis. I ask that we pay our respects to the First Nation and Métis ancestors of this place and reaffirm our relationships with one another.

## ABSTRACT

Media and popular culture are commonly understood to play a significant role in the process of socialization as they can be used to communicate messages about which behaviours are considered socially appropriate, thereby influencing how people perform those behaviours and respond to the behaviours of others. However, queer identities are rarely depicted in the mainstream, and when they are, they are frequently limited to stereotypical representations and/or subtexts. In the case of queer women, in particular, mainstream media representations are often limited to their depictions as objects of desire intended for heteronormative consumption rather than affirmation. This begs the question of how such depictions might influence the formation of queer female identities, as well as how queer women might reclaim narrative spaces. This thesis aims to develop an understanding of how queer women recognize and define lesbian narratives within heteronormative mainstream spaces via the practice of alternative readings and how they use these understandings to construct lesbian counterpublics. Using data collected through a series of semi-structured interviews and collaborative media analyses with self-identified queer women, I attempt to identify narrative strategies more likely to appeal to and attract queer female audiences, ultimately concluding that, rather than particular genres, tropes, or narrative models, participants expressed the strongest attachments to narratives in which queer identities were expressly articulated and normalized, thereby producing a sense of authenticity of possibility in the characters. However, the emergence of new economies within these digital counterpublics can also lead to the reproduction of mainstream hegemonies.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As a child, one of my favourite books was Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. I first borrowed the illustrated Orchard House edition from my local library on a whim and yet immediately felt a sense of kinship with Jo March, although I could not then identify the origin of that sense of affinity, beyond seeing my passion for stories in her. Yet when I first began to explore my sexuality years later, I began to realize what that affinity was. In Jo, I saw the same failure to embody prescribed, loveable womanhood that I was experiencing, and in recognizing this shared characteristic of ours, I began unconsciously projecting my sexuality onto Jo. To me, Jo March became a lesbian.

And yet, while nonconformist Jo adamantly rejects socially-inscribed gender roles in favour of the strong-minded independence of female masculinity, she becomes increasingly submissive and subdued in her efforts to take the place of her departed sister, Beth, as the novel progresses. While she expresses disgust with the notion of marriage from early on and firmly declares her intention to be an old maid (Alcott 198), the novel concludes with her making what Alcott herself once described as a “funny match” with Friedrich Bhaer, which was designed out of “perversity” (qtd. in Trites 1999, 141). And while Jo speaks several times of girls so pretty that she, herself, is half in love with them, she speaks most often of her sisters, for whom she reserves her most tender affections. In fact, Jo has no close female friends at all, having little patience for the girls she perceives as having foolishly succumbed to repressive Victorian norms. While there is plenty of evidence from which to craft the argument for a lesbian subtext in *Little Women*, there is plenty of evidence with which to argue otherwise, as well. Can *Little Women*, then, truly be considered a lesbian novel – even if I, a lesbian, am the one reading it as such?

If one were to look beyond the page and instead to the author, they would find only further ambiguity. *Little Women* is famously semi-autobiographical, with the character of Jo March being a stand-in for Alcott herself, yet relatively little is known definitively about Alcott's sexuality. She left behind few letters and journals and those which have been preserved by historians have largely been ambiguous on the topic of romantic entanglements. All that is truly known is that once, in an 1883 interview with Louise Chandler Moulton, Alcott remarked, “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body . . . because I have fallen in love in my life with so many little girls and never once the least bit with any man.” Through this assertion, Alcott proves herself to be “something of a prophet of



inversion as a concept” (Trites 1999), “inversion” being the sexologist-popularized notion that homosexuality was a consequence of one’s physical gender failing to match one’s mental gender, as seen in Radclyffe Hall’s famous lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. Still, it would undoubtedly be anachronistic and ahistorical to project contemporary understandings of sexuality onto Alcott, based purely on this anecdote alone.

Based on the evidence, the answer to the question, “Can *Little Women* truly be considered a lesbian novel?” appears to be inconclusive at best. And yet, that is simply not how I felt reading *Little Women* so many years ago. Whether consciously or not, in reading *Little Women* and identifying with Jo March as a lesbian reader, I performed an act of translation that cannot easily be undone. Furthermore, I believe that I am not alone – that such acts of translation are, in fact, common practice for queer individuals who have come to recognize that they are less likely to see themselves reflected in prevailing media than their heterosexual peers and use their own experiences to craft new lenses through which their chosen texts can be filtered.

The reason such perceptual behaviour matters, is because media and popular culture can be considered to play a significant role in the processes of socialization, owing to their complex roles in communicating messages about which behaviours are socially appropriate, in influencing how people perform those behaviours, and in shaping responses to the behaviours of others. After all, media can condition how ideas are disseminated in our society, particularly the mass media, and yet access to the means of dissemination is not equal for all classes; “some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world” (Hebdige 1979, 14). Queer individuals often possess limited access to the means of mainstream dissemination; thus, they are frequently faced with stereotypical representations and/or subtexts. This can be especially harmful for queer individuals who are otherwise minoritized – for example, women, people of colour, and people with disabilities, all of whom are also significantly less likely to see themselves depicted in mainstream media than their able-bodied white, cisgender, straight counterparts. Consequently, it begins to matter what, if any, difference is made through queer acts of translation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the role current popular culture and new media play in the formation of contemporary queer female and female-aligned identities and

communities. Although “queer” is commonly used as a blanket term for *all* sexual and gender minorities, I will be focusing on the experiences of female-centered attraction. I do so to explore the intersection of homonegativity and misogyny, with the term “homonegativity” here being used as per Hudson and Ricketts (1980) to highlight the negative impact of sexuality-based discrimination. This intersection is an area which I feel has often been obscured by more universalizing mainstream and queer studies scholarship, as noted by Puar (2002) in her writings on the absence of women as subjects in scholarship about the queer tourism industry. However, I also note that the term “queer” remains useful as a means of encompassing multiple disidentifications within said intersection (Muñoz 1999). Using the data collected, I will attempt to articulate theory to describe narrative patterns which are more likely to appeal to and attract queer female and non-binary audiences.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the following questions will be addressed:

1. How do queer women recognize, define, and claim queer narratives in the forms of mainstream media that appeal to them?
2. How might queer women interact with mainstream media and popular culture in ways that serve both their individual development and their collective communities?
3. How might the affordances provided by new media influence queer engagements with popular culture?

As queer women are rarely depicted in the mainstream, one might assume that queer communities flock to support what little queer representation *does* exist, such that queer narratives could be defined as narratives which prominently feature identifiably queer characters (Farwell 1996). Others have argued that it is instead more common for queer women to approach mainstream heteronormative texts from a negotiated or oppositional audience position (Hall 1973), meaning they may engage with prevailing texts and choose particular elements to interpret as queer more often than they pursue explicitly queer content, particularly as constructed by mainstream producers. This view, which I share, is drawn from the observation that queer women are often depicted in popular culture as commodities or objects of desire (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009) intended for heterosexual male audiences, making it difficult for actual queer women to identify positively with the majority of available representations. Queer women may reject these

negative portrayals in favour of “reading” non-queer characters and texts (with which they *do* positively identify) *as* queer. In other words, they may reject these targeted and targeting portrayals in favour of engaging in the kind of translation that is described in my introductory anecdote. While queer-produced media with explicitly queer themes *does* exist, such media often falls under the category of “independent” or “alternative,” resulting in limited circulation, which may create barriers to accessibility. I further believe new media enables alternative readings, such as those I will be discussing, on a greater scale than was previously thought possible, given the ways that the Internet uniquely meets the socialization needs of queer individuals who may have limited social spheres for discussing such matters in real life, due to stigma surrounding their identities (Driver 2007; Hillier and Harrison 2007). This allows for the creation of enormous “imaginary communities” (Hill 2014) – that is, communities in which the communal bond is rooted in the perceived temporality of a shared emotional response, rather than a shared space or shared personal characteristics – centred entirely around shared queerly translated readings of mainstream texts. My hope is that this research will allow me to identify which specific elements of a text or narrative can render it more receptive to queer re-imaginings so that I may highlight the need for greater diversity and nuance in mainstream representations of queer, and indeed all, women, than are currently available.

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that the individuals who agreed to participate in this study were truthfully representing themselves as self-identified queer women and/or female-aligned non-binary individuals.

It is important to note that the focus of this study is intended to be on queer female experiences. To accommodate non-binary women and lesbians, non-binary individuals have been included, provided they identify as female-aligned and are comfortable having their experiences associated with women’s experiences more broadly. However, not all expressions of non-binary genders are the same, meaning it should be understood that (a) non-binary individuals are *not* being conflated with women in general and (b) any findings which involve non-binary participants should not be interpreted as being broadly applicable to non-binary people as a whole.

## Key Terms

*Affordance*: a resource or support. The capacity to take a particular action.

*Alternative Readings*: readings of a text which challenge, resist, or reimagine the presumed heteronormative reading. See “Negotiated Position” and “Oppositional Position.”

*Counterpublic*: according to Michael Warner (2002), a discursive space constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. According to Ann Cvetkovich, an archive of the ephemeral traces of lived experience, often with a foundation of trauma. See “Public.”

*Dominant-Hegemonic Position*: a way of interpreting media as defined by Stuart Hall (1973). When adopting a dominant-hegemonic position, the audience typically understands that there is a particular connotation to the message being communicated and will decode that message as connoted.

*Fandom*: a community or subculture based on shared interests or appreciation of a cultural product. Often characterized by active emotional engagement rather than passive consumption.

*Fan Labour*: productive creative activities engaged in by fans. See “Transformative Works.”

*Heteronormative*: denoting or relating to the ideology that heterosexuality is the “normal” or preferred sexual orientation.

*Kyriarchy*: any social system built around domination, oppression, and submission. Coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Used in feminist theory to extend “patriarchy” beyond gender.

*Lesbian*: a woman or a female-aligned individual who primarily experiences attraction to those who are not men. This is most commonly understood as being exclusive attraction to women, but sometimes includes an attraction to those who are non-binary. Something which denotes or relates to such an attraction (books, movies, films, etc.) can be described as ‘lesbian.’

*Media*: the collective means of mass communication, including broadcasting and publishing.

*Media Ecology*: the study of how media, technology, and communications interact to affect and reflect human environments and variable distribution of critical attention.

*Negotiated Position*: a way of interpreting media as defined by Stuart Hall (1973). When adopting a negotiated position, the audience typically understands that there is a “dominantly defined and professional signified” (102) meaning to the message being communicated, but will reject elements of it.

*New Media*: the collective means of digital mass or social communication, including the Internet. Typically characterized by allowing for – or even requiring – some level of audience interactivity, blurring the lines between audience and producer. Also called “digital media.”

*Oppositional Position*: a way of interpreting media as defined by Stuart Hall. When adopting an oppositional stance, the audience typically understands that there is an ‘intended’ meaning to the message being communicated but will reject that message in its entirety in favour of re-totalizing it within their alternative framework of reference.

*Popular Culture*: the cultural activities of the masses as opposed to the wealthy or educated elites. Generally recognized as the artistic practices, beliefs, and objects which are most dominant or ubiquitous in a society at any given point.

*Public*: according to Michael Warner, a discursive space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. A dominant public would be one which is more likely than others to be seen as standing in *for* the public.

*Queer*: an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. Includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, non-binary, Two-Spirit, and others.

*Social Constructionism*: an epistemological position which proposes that reality as we understand it is jointly constructed through interactions between individuals.

*Textual Poaching*: a term used to describe the processes by which fans of a media text construct new interpretations, analyses, and creative works inspired by the text. Popularized by Henry Jenkins (1992).

*Transformative Works*: creative works about characters or settings created by fans of the original work rather than by the original creators.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiple theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for the analyses undertaken in this thesis. However, before these approaches can be discussed, it is necessary to clarify the purpose behind the categorical language chosen for this study. After clarifying my particular use of the word “lesbian,” this chapter will examine social construction theory and the relationships among media, social ideologies, and identities. This is followed by a discussion of audiences and communications theory, which further expands upon the notion that media plays an integral role in personal identity development, and also attends to the role of audiences in the production of meaning. Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model of audience engagement and the possibility of (imagined) affordances are given particular attention in this section. This literature review then concludes with a discussion of how the evolution of new media has affected audience engagement with media more broadly, with emphasis being placed on the practices of “fandom” and how fan activity may provide an alternative affective economy to more capitalistic orientations and understandings of creative labour.

### Defining “Lesbian”

If one objective of my research is to provide at least a foundation upon which theory to describe the construction of lesbian counterpublics can be articulated, then it is vital that I begin by defining what is meant by the word “lesbian,” in the first place. I wish first to acknowledge the difficulty any researcher in the field of sexualities studies might encounter when it comes to determining the categorical vocabulary one employs. There are two main problems which have a tendency to emerge. First, there is a question of whether the categorical definitions being used are too generalizing, thereby potentially obscuring the diversity of experiences under discussion. Second, there is a question of whether the language used is too *specific*, thereby potentially excluding relevant populations through the suggestion that their experiences are *irrelevant* to the matter at hand. For example, while the commonly-used term “lesbophobia” can be productively understood as being categorically different from homonegativity, it can also be understood as being but one dimension *of* homonegativity, begging the question of which term is most correct.

In the case of this particular study, it is true that I desire some degree of specificity. I am interested exclusively in women and non-binary individuals (that is, non-men) who experience some degree of attraction to women and female-identified non-binary individuals (again, non-

men). This specificity is due to my concern that broader queer scholarship has a tendency to obscure how homonegativity and misogyny uniquely intersect. Furthermore, we have yet to live in a world in which substantive gender equity has been achieved. It is therefore my belief that attempts at gender neutrality, such as studies which group gay men and lesbians together, inevitably skew in favour of those most privileged by our kyriarchal society – in this case, by centering (whether intentionally or not) the expressions and experiences of gay men over the expressions and experiences of gay women and non-binary individuals.

On the other hand, “non-men who are attracted to non-men” is an *enormous* demographic, and many of the terms which we might instinctively employ in everyday conversation can prove exclusionary upon closer examination. Consider “lesbian.” Perhaps the most common understanding of the term would be “a woman who is exclusively attracted to other women.” Already this excludes women who, owing to the operations of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), have experienced some attraction to men, as well as bisexual and pansexual women whose attractions are nonexclusive, but who would nonetheless fall into the category of non-men attracted to non-men. Similarly, there may be non-binary individuals who do not identify with womanhood in any capacity and may consequently feel as though this study cannot possibly apply to them, despite their *also* being non-men attracted to non-men.

Even if I were to set aside my fears of potentially excluding relevant experiences, there remains the problem of defining a term like “lesbian,” to begin with. As noted by Lisa Diamond, such terms are made problematic by their ambiguity: do they refer to an individual’s sexual orientation, their sexual identity, or their sexual behaviour? Furthermore, what conditions shape the need to consider these aspects separately in the first place? (Diamond 13). Diamond’s research into sexual fluidity has found that even amongst self-identified lesbians, it is very rare for self-selecting members of the category to share a common understanding of what it means to *be* a lesbian. The sheer diversity of experiences brought to this socially-constructed category is once again enormous, and consequently, the definition of the word “lesbian” becomes nebulous, or, at the very least, less than precise. Given these considerations, what language can be employed to express both a desire to attend to the specificities of particular oppressions *and* to refrain from suggesting that a particular subgroup’s experiences are somehow less worthy of attention? In an effort to be sensitive to these nuances, my goal is to honour the experiences of participants as articulated.

In this thesis, I will be using the term “queer” as a blanket identifier for all self-identified women and non-binary individuals who experience non-heterosexual attractions, regardless of the exact pattern of these attractions. In using the word “queer,” I include all self-identified lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women and non-binary individuals, as well as those who may be questioning or prefer to disregard more conventional identity labels. However, although I will be collectively referring to participants as “queer,” should an individual identify with another label, I will use that preferred label instead for any discussion of that individual’s commentary.

As my interest is specifically in non-heterosexual attraction – that is, attraction directed at women or non-binary individuals *by* women and non-binary individuals – the word “lesbian” will be used to denote such attractions. This is to distinguish the attractions under study from alternative attractions, in the cases of individuals with non-exclusive orientations – for example, bisexual women whose attraction to men would still be bisexual but would not be of interest to this study. The phrase “lesbian narratives” will refer to “narratives with a lesbian quality” – that is, narratives regarding non-heterosexual attractions toward women – but shall not be used in reference to participants who do not personally identify as lesbian, nor to all participants as a collective.

Although I acknowledge that, as pointed out by Diamond, terms such as “lesbian” can be ambiguous in whether they refer to orientation, identity, or behaviour, my desire to centre participants as the producers of meaning has led me to resolve not to prioritize a uniformity of vocabulary over participants’ self-identifications. While it is true that this may mean no two lesbians participating in this study share an understanding of what *makes* them lesbian, what they *do* have in common is a belief that they *are* lesbian or possess an understanding of aspects of lesbian experiences germane to their own particular processes of identification. I believe that my role as researcher is not to assess the accuracy or authenticity of participants’ self-identifications, nor to consolidate seemingly disparate lesbian identities, but instead to assess the significance of what differences and illuminations may arise in the course of my research, by respecting participants’ identity processes.

## **Social Construction and Media Ecology**

Social construction theory posits that human beings are in a constant state of co-creating our realities. As our identities are in a constant state of becoming, they have the potential to be



greatly influenced by our interactions with the world. Media in various formats from print to web are among the common vehicles of social influence in Western Canada, through which individual interactions are transmitted to the broader social culture, and through which ecologies of affective attention are organized. This allows media to function as a conduit through which external perceptions of the self are seen on a much larger scale than in direct, face-to-face interactions, allowing individuals to develop a mediated sense of who they are in relation to the world (Gergen 1999). Should the attitudes and values being conveyed through the prevailing media concern a component of one's identity, one's perception and performance of that identity may change accordingly, whether or not that medium represents the views of those most affected (Raley and Lucas 2006). This notion of media as an extension of the senses is a key concept in media ecology theory, which argues that communication technologies and their capacities to function as an extension of human interactions act as a primary factor in social change, particularly as emergent media summon perceptual shifts or diverse audiences to particular messages and meanings.

Many researchers have drawn connections between the lack of positive representations of minorities in the media and low self-esteem among members of minority groups. George Gerbner and Larry Gross's cultivation theory (1976) posits that the greater one's exposure to media (in this context, television), the more likely one is to believe that social reality aligns with the reality onscreen. Although cultivation theory has been critiqued for its positivistic approach – referring to its presumption that there exists an objective reality with which media realities can conflict – it is still widely used in mass-communication and social cognition research, with one of the more consistent findings being that vivid and frequent depictions of particular constructs increase the mental accessibility of said constructs and that “when people make judgements about other persons, they tend to use the constructs that are most readily accessible from memory” (Shrum 2002, 54). Gerbner further coined the phrase “symbolic annihilation” to describe the effects of the erasure of minoritized groups from fictional worlds, a term which has since become a similarly core concept in discussions of media and representational diversity; Gaye Tuchman then expanded on the notion in 1978 by proposing that symbolic annihilation consists of three aspects – omission, trivialisation, and condemnation. This multifaceted approach highlights how a lack of explicit or authentic representation can be similarly harmful as negative or stereotyped representations.

Susan Gair (1995) notes that the experiences of sexual minorities may be unique compared to other communities in that “the parents of lesbian and gay children are typically not lesbian or gay and therefore do not mirror the experience of what it feels like to be so” (107). Minoritized individuals typically receive the majority of their external ‘feedback’ from people who exist outside of their minoritized community – i.e., in Canada, racial minorities will typically receive the majority of their external feedback from a white-dominated society. However, with racial minorities, children will often at least see their experiences mirrored by their family members. As noted by Gair, that is rarely the case with sexual minorities, meaning it often becomes necessary for them to seek external sources of validation. In a study seeking to assess the impact of media representations on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found that the presence of queer characters on television provided respondents with a sense of social support that allowed them to feel more comfortable with their respective identities (356). These findings, when coupled with Gair’s observations about the necessity of external validation, suggest that media likely plays a significant role in queer identity formation.

Also of note is the tendency for queer individuals to place a unique degree of importance on parasocial relationships (that is, social bonds audiences develop with media personae) than their non-queer counterparts. While most members of the general population have the capacity to develop parasocial relationships, members of “special populations who have difficulty developing real-life social relationships with like-others, have a strong desire to escape from their real-life experiences, or feel socially isolated” (Bond 2018), and thus, may develop stronger attachments to these perceived relationships with characters and media personae as an alternative for the real-life relationships they may be missing.

In addition to the obstacles they often face in intimate relationship development, queer women and non-binary individuals are uniquely targeted by media erasure, due to how both the non-male *and* the queer components of their identities are devalued by the dominant culture. This means that positive, authentic representations of lesbianism are rare. What representations *do* exist are often mediated through non-lesbian communities for the sake of non-lesbian audiences, meaning “wherever a lesbian woman looks, the portrayal of what it is to be lesbian is often distorted” (Gair 107-8). This distortion has led to problematizing the definition of what a lesbian text even *is*.

## **Audiences and Communication**

In the book *Heterosexual Plots & Lesbian Narratives*, Marilyn Farwell (1996) poses the question: “Where is the ‘lesbian’ in the lesbian narrative?” (6). By raising this question, she is asking: must the characters themselves be lesbian? Must the author? How does one determine what does and does not constitute lesbian content? Farwell argues that, due to the displacement of actual lesbians from conversations about lesbian media, lesbian narratives have become a “disputed form, dependent upon various interpretative strategies” (Farwell 4), unsustainable as a distinct, established genre within the “closed ideological system” of western narrative in which “lesbians enter only to be entangled in a heterosexual, male story” (Farwell 4-5). So long as non-lesbian audiences are privileged over lesbians themselves in the creation of so-called lesbian-themed storyline, this is a generic challenge which will remain difficult to resolve.

Farwell discusses two possible approaches to lesbian audiences seeking a more definitive understanding of what constitutes a lesbian narrative. The first, informed by traditional feminist theory, states that a lesbian narrative is one defined by identifiably lesbian authors, readers, and characters (Farwell 4-5). The second, referred to by Farwell as the postmodern approach, understands ‘lesbian’ as a fluid term that can be used metaphorically to refer to a relationship between, as Frann Michel called it, “two feminines” (qtd. in Farwell 9). Thus, the onus is on the audience to declare a narrative ‘lesbian’ or otherwise. This approach has two major benefits: the first is that, as traditional narrative structure typically posits that “an oppositional and hierarchical relationship of male and female [is] the foundation of both heterosexual and male homosocial or homosexual plots,” female bonding is usually disrupted by default, making the lesbian “logically impossible” (Farwell 15-16). The postmodern approach *makes* the lesbian possible by declaring that female bonding is not necessarily a requirement. The second benefit is that the postmodern approach privileges the audience’s interpretive power over the connoted meaning of the text, acknowledging the roles audiences play in successful communication.

This privileging of the audience’s interpretive power over the connoted meaning of a text could be considered a form of appropriation. Through appropriation, individuals derive personal meaning from the symbolic contents of their experiences or environments as a means of integrating new information into their worldview (Thompson, 1995, p. 8; qtd. in St. Germain). This is contrasted with the process of assimilation, in which new information is integrated into one’s worldview through relating said information to pre-existing concepts and ideas, or

accommodation, in which existing cognitive constructs are modified to help make sense of said information. The processes of appropriation can be observed in the ways in which audiences engage with media texts through the assignation of personal meaning to symbolic images, such as in the postmodern approach described above.

Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" argues that to privilege the author's position above the reader's in literary criticism is to impose unnecessary limits on the interpretation of a text. The reader can bring a host of new potential meanings to any text *through* interpretation, for regardless of the author's presumed intent, any text must necessarily be filtered through the lens of the reader's experiences, just as the text was necessarily filtered through the lens of the *author's* experiences in the initial act of creation. To argue that the reader's influence matters less than the author's is to neglect the fact that the author themselves is but a conduit for a myriad of ideas which have only found their way to the author over the course of said author's lifetime. Similarly, in the essay "What Is an Author?", Michel Foucault (1969) proposes that the role of an author is not to inform interpretation, but merely to aid in classification, with the author's name "point[ing] to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refer[ring] to the status of this discourse within a society and culture" (305). As the author's role more or less serves as the mode through which discourse is circulated and value and meaning are ascribed, Foucault imagines a day in which the author is no longer necessary and a text can be evaluated on the basis of its content alone, asking "What matter who's speaking?"

Yet to this question, Nancy Miller (1982) responds: for women, it *does* matter. The contextualizing function described by Foucault is only an accurate description of authorship if the author is someone who has the power to contribute meaningfully to the circulation of discourse in the first place, and "only those who have it can play with not having it" (53). Expanding on this point, it is not only women for whom authorship matters, but also queer individuals, people of colour, and people with disabilities, all of whom have historically been silenced in related ways and have subsequently not been allowed to contribute equitably to the constitution of knowledge and meaning production. Conversely, while the identities of individual writers may not matter in Foucault's schema (itself a way of obscuring the prevalence of Euro-colonialist discourses by which he was most influenced), what *does* matter is that the discourses circulated and meanings ascribed via the mode of "author" have primarily been dominated by those most privileged by a Euro-centric kyriarchical society – able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual white men.

While Barthes may argue for a death of the author, he does so only as a means of discouraging the imposition of artificial limits on texts which are, in reality, multidimensional. To Barthes, the author is but a translator who puts to paper the myriad of influences informing their creative process. If there is no sense in making an appeal to biographical context, it is because the meaning of a text does not begin and end with the author's personal frame of reference. What meaning can be derived from a text instead finds its locus in the *reader*.

A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted (Barthes 5-6).

In his seminal essay "Encoding, Decoding," Stuart Hall (1973) attempts to articulate the tension which exists between a text and its reader and/or a piece of media and its audience in the context of television criticism. He notes that the inevitable differences between the theoretical intentions of the producer and the audience's response render texts malleable, making the meaning of any given text at least partially dependent on the context in which the audience receives the message being conveyed. He proposes three stances that individual audience members may adopt in the process of decoding a message being communicated through the media; (a) the dominant-hegemonic position, in which the message is decoded as connoted by the producer via signification in a hegemonic manner, (b) the negotiated position, in which the message is received but certain elements are rejected or only accepted conditionally, and (c) the oppositional position, in which the meaning is recognized by the individual but is then "[re-totalized] within some alternative framework of reference" (102-3).

The latter two positions Hall describes align with the postmodern approach named by Farwell, as both allow for the interpretation of a text as lesbian when that possibility was not necessarily consciously projected by the producer. Both Hall's notion of the negotiated and the oppositional *and* Farwell's notion of the postmodern could be considered complementary with the construction of counterpublics, framing a discursive arena which exists in parallel to dominant discourses and provides space for marginalized communities to create and circulate parallel and potentially resistant discourses. Lesbian counterpublics, in particular, often serve the

dual purpose of transforming affect into artistic expression and using fantasy to compensate for the absence of acknowledged lesbians in the public sphere, such as with the eponymous archives discussed in Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*. Whether one chooses to call the approach negotiated, oppositional, or postmodern, the very act of experiencing or offering an alternative reading can transform an otherwise hegemonic public text *into* such a parallel and productive discourse.

In recent years, Hall's model has been critiqued for being overly simplistic. Schrøder (2000) questions what is meant by the term "preferred reading," asking how one is meant to distinguish mere polysemy from what Hall refers to as the oppositional position – "just how interpretively active are audiences, and under what circumstances should the interpretations be deemed an instance of resistance?" (237). Applications of Hall's model typically define "preferred reading" as the reading determined by the dominant ideology of the culture, but this further begs the question of what is meant by "dominant." Moreover, audience research which "romanticizes the role of the reader" is often "marred by ... [the] undocumented presumption that forms of interpretative resistance are more widespread than subordination or the reproduction of dominant meanings" (Morley, qtd. in Schrøder). Thus, it becomes important to distinguish a *privileged* reading – one more likely to be actualized by audiences, and which can therefore be considered "dominant" by virtue of sheer numbers – from a *preferred* reading – often believed to be the 'intended' reading of a text and which can typically be identified by a text's structure and apparent narrative constraints, meaning it can be considered "dominant" by virtue of the producer's ability to place those constraints to begin with.

In 2017, Adrienne Shaw's article "Encoding and decoding affordances: Stuart Hall and interactive media technologies" revisited Hall's essay with a focus on new forms of digital media – specifically, how the possibilities introduced by emerging network-based technologies may call for a new understanding of the audience-producer relationship. Shaw argues that the encoding/decoding model cannot adequately be applied to digital media texts, due to audience activity no longer necessarily being a matter of audience members displaying resistive agency; in fact, it is often a requirement of even using the media in question, such as the case with video games (597). Thus, the matter of clearly delineating a site of production has become more complicated and it becomes necessary to recognize that audience interaction with media is closer to a negotiation between multiple forces than an example of one-way communication in any

direction, regardless of the perspective privileged. Shaw proposes that the encoding/decoding model be adapted through the framework of affordances, with “affordances” referring to the possibilities for use embedded within objects and environments. With such a framework, the dominant/hegemonic position would involve using an object for its perceptible affordances, the negotiated position would involve exploiting possible affordances whether included purposefully or not, and the oppositional position would involve making use of hidden affordances or turning false affordances – or “those uses objects look like they should be able to do but do not” (Shaw 2017, 594) – into *actual* affordances. The introduction of affordances to Hall’s model complements Schrøder and Morley’s definition of a preferred reading as the one encouraged by the constraints of the text, rather than the one which is most commonly actualized by the audience.

Nagy and Neff (2015) expand the concept further to that of *imagined* affordances, a term intended to increase attention to the role of affect and emotion in audience engagement with media. Whereas the term “affordance” refers to what is possible for users of a particular form of communications technology or the audience of a given piece of media, the term “imagined affordance” acknowledges the role that audience’s perceptions and expectations may play in informing what we understand to be an affordance: “These expectations may not be encoded hard and fast into such tools by design, but they nevertheless become part of the user’s perceptions of what actions are available to them” (5).

The encoding/decoding model is useful in discussions of alternative readings as it helps articulate the rationale behind individuals deciding to read meaning into a text that was not signified in a hegemonic manner by the original producers of that text. The introduction of (imagined) affordances to this framework become especially useful in discussions of audience engagement with new media. As noted by Shaw, interactive media technologies, another term for what I have been referring to as simply ‘new media,’ typically *necessitate* an active audience; furthermore, although Hall proposed that all communication is in some way a negotiation between audience and producer, interactive media technologies/new media allow the audience to become influential producers and co-producers themselves. This is perhaps best observed in the phenomenon that is media fandom.

## New Media and Interactivity

In their 1977 essay “Girls and Subcultures,” Robbie and Garber examined how female participation in youth subcultures often goes unresearched, their contributions rendered non-vital and negligible due their emphasis on private consumption and/or borderline idol worship. This led Robbie and Garber to conclude that girls and women have been positioned as passive, uncritical consumers of a culture which is produced and dominated by boys and men. Hill’s “Reconceptualising hard rock and metal fans as a group: Imaginary Community” revisits this notion in the context of hard rock and metal fandom; however, she found that male perspectives continue to dominate subcultural theory and that systemic discrimination plays a crucial role in forming the experiences of women in most fan communities. The frequent manifestation of female fan behaviour as domestic expressions and private engagements may function as a consequence of this hegemony. Because of the barriers subcultural communities themselves provide to female participation, Hill defines fandom as being more about passion than activity, suggesting that it can better be defined by the perception of a shared emotional response than any singular mass ritual.

This definition of fandom as a collective emotional response, rather than a performance or a spectacle is, in part, why I have elected to frame my research as a matter of counterpublics rather than a matter of subcultures, despite borrowing aspects of subcultural theory for the purposes of my analysis. Subcultural studies, having grown out of a tradition of urban ethnography, places a great deal of emphasis on *style* as a means of opposition to cultural hegemony. The words “style” and “subculture” are even conflated in Dick Hebdige’s famous *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, a line of thought which many social theorists have since replicated. J. Patrick Williams (2011) provides several examples in his *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*, offering quotations from John Clarke and Phil Cohen that describe subculture as being about “[solving], but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved” and “[resolving], albeit ‘magically,’ the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture.” Language such as ‘imaginary’ and ‘magically’ suggests that style is immaterial and implies that while it may be “valorous,” it is ultimately “impotent in terms of its potential for societal-level change” (Williams 74). In contrast, Michael Warner defines counterpublics as being discursive spaces constituted through a conflictual relation with the dominant public. Counterpublics serve a similar function to



subcultures, being subaltern arenas in which cultural hegemonies may be challenged, but the emphasis is placed on *discourse* rather than style, allowing for the kind of private, yet collective emotional response described by Hill, even in the absence of style's spectacle, while acknowledging the power such discourses can have to affect real-world change.

On the subject of counterpublics: in addition to exploring how stereotyped representations of marginalized sexualities impact queer women and non-binary individuals, of interest to this study is the use of new media as a community-building tool. While traditional media might refer to the collective means of mass communication, such as newspapers and television broadcasts, in recent years, the term 'new media' has emerged in reference to means of mass communication which specifically utilize digital technologies, such as the Internet. The Internet is too complex an entity to be considered a singular cultural text in and of itself, but it has facilitated the rise of mass-networking sites, many of which allow for individuals to capitalize on the Internet's relative anonymity and transcend geographical boundaries to directly access digital communities they may have had no means to connect with otherwise. This provides countless alternate sites where people of marginalized genders and sexualities can seek external 'feedback' and validation of their respective identities.

Scholars such as Jan Fernback have argued that the sheer enormity of the Internet means that the notion of a cyber-community has become "increasingly diluted" into a mere "pastiche of elements that [only] ostensibly 'signify' community" (2007). Consequently, the definition of "online community" has been the subject of some contestation over the years. To address this, I will be drawing upon Parks' (2011) five criteria for distinguishing an online grouping from a virtual community. These five criteria are:

1. The ability of members to engage in collective action
2. Shared rituals among members and some form of social regulation among them
3. Patterned interaction among members
4. The identification by members with the group and a sense of belonging and attachment to it
5. The self-awareness of members of being part of a community

Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) define media fandom as "a phenomenon that encourages individuals to collectively and socially unite within a subculture based on shared interests or

appreciation of a media world or product,” a behaviour which, over time, allows members of these subcultures to develop a unified sense of social identity (32). Upon comparing this definition to Parks’ five criteria, I have concluded that most (if not all) media fandoms would indeed qualify as communities, online or not. Furthermore, as the majority of contemporary youth use the Internet and have fully integrated online participation into their social lives, it is “counter-productive to position the offline and online worlds in opposition or to assume a false separation between the two ... [as] their experiences in either space affects their behavior in the other” (Craig and McInroy 2014, 97). One example might be my own experiences with the novel *Little Women*, as referenced in the introduction of this thesis, in which I initially projected a lesbian understanding onto the character of Jo March without realizing it only for said understanding to grow richer and more complex over time as a consequence of access to primarily-online texts discussing the context of the novel. In this example, my experiences in online spaces certainly affected my experiences elsewhere and there would be little sense in attempting to draw a meaningful distinction between the two.

John Fiske (1987) wrote extensively on the negotiations which take place between media texts (in this case television) and their audiences. He named oral culture – that is, talk *about* television – as an important site of meaning-making in the act of television-viewing. The Internet provides a similar site in which discussion about media can occur. Moreover, use of the Internet as a site for discussion can facilitate the sort of covert resistance which was once commonly associated with zines. Zines, being “simultaneously public and private,” would provide members of subcultures such as *riot grrrl* with the means to “express their thoughts and feelings without fear of ridicule or censure”; similarly, social media allows participants to “overtly express their anger, confusion, and frustration publicly to like-minded peers but still remain covert and anonymous to authority figures” (Schilt 2003, 79, qtd. in Williams 2011). Thus, the Internet as a site of digital engagement of audiences as prospective media producers has the potential to allow for more authentic discussion of media as well.

While Hill might define fandom as being more about a shared emotional response than any singular mass ritual, with the Internet, shared emotional responses can *become* mass rituals via global communication that now exists on an unprecedented scale. An example of this might be illustrated in how, when a new film is released, the Internet can immediately be flooded with responses and speculation from all who have seen it and those who wish to see it. It is a culture

that exists contrary to the notion of a passive audience, transforming “personal reaction into social interaction, spectator culture into participatory culture” (Tsay-Vogel and Sanders 33). From this mass, potentially global discussion emerges the productive capacity that defines mainstream understandings of contemporary fandom.

This productive capacity is what Pearson (2010) refers to as the “gift economy” of modern fandom. New media increasingly enables participants in modern fandom to become producers themselves, willingly performing and circulating free fan labour as an expression of love for the original product. This labour, whether it be fan-created art, music, or fiction, is overwhelmingly freely distributed out of passion for the media object in question. Pearson refers to this phenomenon as a gift economy in deference to how members of these communities rarely attempt to capitalize on their creative works; instead, traditional fan practices largely constitute a form of egalitarian, non-hierarchical “horizontal creativity.”

The gift economy of fandom is significant, due to how it manages to provide an alternative to the capitalistic regimes of mainstream popular culture. In 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term “culture industry” in reference to the commodification of art by a capitalistic society more concerned with profit than free expression. They were concerned that the uniformity and superficiality of mass-produced art would go hand-in-hand with the commodification and suppression of human thought. Fandom’s theoretical freedom from the influence of capital may liberate fans, at least temporarily, from the commodifying influence of such mass-produced art, allowing them to operate as “textual poachers” who actively build on and redefine existing mass culture; however, that freedom is relative, as it often becomes necessary for freelance creatives eventually to capitalize on their skills so as to sustain their independent practice. Regardless, as fandom activity increasingly blurs the lines between producer and consumer, with the difference between a “fan” and such consumers being marked primarily by the presence or absence of passionate investment, fans find freedom from the dominant culture through creation of a new one (Seregina and Schouten 2017).

The term “textual poaching” was popularized by fandom scholar Henry Jenkins (1992) in his seminal work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. However, I believe the poaching analogy presents a flawed, capitalistic understanding of fan culture that fails to fully capture the alternative affective and material economies that can emerge from within fan communities. The use of the word “poaching,” in particular, suggests that mainstream cultural

producers are seen as the sole lawful proprietors of the texts produced and that fans exist solely on the margins of meaning production, preserving the binary separation between audience and producer. I believe fan practices, such as constructing alternative readings, instead work to challenge this binary, particularly in the case of minoritized fans seeking to reclaim already appropriated aesthetics, thereby providing a vital intervention on behalf of communities who have often been mined and muted, simultaneously. It is in the context of such economies that I believe queer women are most empowered to reclaim and reinterpret texts to better reflect their own experiences, finding and defining lesbian narratives where they might otherwise have stayed invisible.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

The design of this study has been informed by the constructionist epistemology in which I have grounded my research. In this chapter, the meaning of the epistemological framework and its influence on my methods will be explained. This account will be followed by an explanation of my methodology, beginning with a discussion of how I have selected my participants and followed by a description of my actual procedures. As my study consists of two discrete phases, I will address the procedures of each phase separately. This chapter will then conclude with a return to my constructionist epistemology. Having explained my research procedures, I will elaborate on *how* constructionism has informed this study's design, including my decision to conduct my analysis via grounded theory.

### **Epistemology**

As outlined in my literature review, my research has been grounded in a constructionist epistemology. For research to be considered social constructionist, it must be undertaken with the following tenets in mind: (a) that taken-for-granted knowledge is not necessarily absolute, (b) that all ways of understanding are historically and culturally specific and must be understood as context-dependent, (c) that knowledge is sustained by social processes, and (d) that knowledge and social action go together (Burr 1995). I have adopted this epistemological approach as I intend for my research to take a critical stance towards commonly-held assumptions about gender and sexuality via my analysis of how popular media becomes a resource in the construction of queer female subjects and how queer female subjects, in turn, may participate in the production of a society's popular culture.

### **Participant Recruitment and Criteria**

Participants were recruited via posters placed in strategic public locations as well as notices posted on the University of Saskatchewan's electronic bulletin board, PAWS (see Appendix A). These recruitment tools stated that I was looking for volunteers to take part in a study regarding lesbian narratives, informing prospective participants that their involvement would consist of a single interview, one to two hours in length, and the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview, if desired.

Prospective participants were asked to contact the researcher if they identified as either a woman or a non-binary individual who loved women and were interested in providing an interview. An effort was made to communicate that this study was open to all expressions and articulations of lesbian attraction, as the recruitment tool explicitly welcomed transgender volunteers and directly stated that one's exact identity label did not matter so long as the volunteer experienced *some* degree of attraction towards women. This approach was undertaken due to the study's use of purposeful maximum variation sampling, a method which allows for a wide range of perspectives, regardless of sample size, due to the non-uniformity of the sample. Through exploring the phenomenon under study from as many angles as possible while considering intersectional factors such as race, class, etc., I hoped to be able to name and clarify common themes evident across the sample.

Criteria for exclusion included not identifying as either a woman or a non-binary individual and experiencing no level of same-sex attraction to women; however, no effort was made on the part of the researcher to evaluate the authenticity of participants' self-reported queerness. While some might argue that this approach could compromise the validity of my findings, due to the potential for extreme differentiation in experiences addressed, it is my belief that this approach best reflected my policy of centring participant perspectives rather than allowing my authority as researcher to dominate their meaning-making processes.

When this study was first proposed, the projected sample size was three to five. This number was selected for several reasons. First, it was determined that analysis might be complicated by the inclusion of multiple phases in the research. By emphasizing the quality of the interview data over sample size and conducting a comprehensive analysis, it was hoped that procedures could be simplified without compromising the validity of the findings. This approach is consistent with how qualitative research is generally more concerned with garnering an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study than with making generalizations for a large population or testing a particular hypothesis. Second, while saturation remains an important factor regardless of whether or not a study seeks to produce generalizable conclusions, it was important to remember that the project engages with a marginalized population. This introduced the possibility of individuals being reluctant to participate, due to the potential risks associated with inadvertent identification with the study. Furthermore, limited resources were available for facilitating participant access, such as the provision of transport or compensation. The projected

sample size was designed to account for these possible barriers, although the researcher remained optimistic that participation might exceed prudently modest expectations.

While it is unusual to use grounded theory in a study with such a small subject pool, there is, nonetheless, precedent. For example, a 2010 study of lesbian identity development conducted by Shapiro, Rios, and Stewart used a similarly grounded theory-informed approach with a sample size of only four women. They believed that the richness and scope of the narratives provided by these women would offset the limitations of a smaller sample size, a hope shared by myself when conducting the current study.

## **Procedures**

This study consisted of two phases. The first phase followed a qualitative interview design featuring interviews conducted in a semi-structured format. A qualitative approach was chosen for the sake of obtaining participant perspectives with a focus on individual processes of relational subject formation – that is, the process by which subjects attain qualities through social relations (Donati and Archer 2015). Participants were given the option of participating in either a sit-down or an online interview using the Internet calling services Skype or Discord. The option for an online interview was included for the sake of both long-distance participants and participants who would prefer not to meet in person. Online interviews were conducted in audio format online and were digitally recorded by the interviewer. As advertised on the recruitment tool, these interviews were estimated to last a duration of one to two hours. However, after the completion of several interviews, this estimated duration was amended to 45 minutes to an hour on all recruitment tools. All phase one interviews made use of the interview guide found in Appendix B.

Following these initial interviews, participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview for the second phase of the study. This second phase consisted of a content analysis conducted in collaboration with the participants in which we discussed specific texts they had identified as meaningful. Each participant was asked to recommend a particular media text which I then read/watched/listened to/played myself for the sake of having an informed discussion. The aim of this phase was an open-ended conversation about the participant's relation to the chosen text in which the participant themselves guided the conversation as much as possible. This phase did not make use of a guide prepared by the researcher beforehand, although a short-list of prompts based on the suggested text was prepared as a contingency in the event that a participant

would welcome conversation starters from the researcher. This list of prompts was derived from the sample interview guide found in Appendix C and was distinct for each participant. The objective of this second phase was to gain insight into what specific elements of media texts individual participants prioritized, as well as how they understood these specific elements to exist in relation to their respective identities. In other words, while phase one addressed the generalities of participant approaches to generating alternative readings, so as to capture the essence of the practice in broad thematic strokes, phase two represented a move into the particulars of participants' lived experiences of specific media objects. Due to time constraints experienced by both the researcher and volunteers, this second phase was not practical for all participants and is considered only as an enhancement to phase one, the primary phase.

### **Interviewing**

Interviewing is a common method of conducting qualitative research, particularly in the social sciences wherein the researcher may have a vested interest in developing a subject-centered understanding of marginalized experiences. In addition to allowing for the collection of detailed responses to specific research questions and aiding in the articulation of particular experiences, interviews provide some degree of control over the flow of information for both the researchers and participants.

Interviews were selected for the first phase of this study to encourage respondents to speak in their own voices rather than restrict themselves to the language of the researcher, as articulated through more pre-formed instruments, such as surveys. Interviews were designed to be semi-structured with open-ended questions meant to encourage conversation so as to account for the possibility that potentially relevant topics may have been overlooked by the researcher. Aside from preliminary questions intended to help create a simple profile of the participant, questions generally fell into one of two categories: those based on tastes in queer media, specifically, and those based on practices of media engagement. The final interview instrument consisted of fifteen core questions and thirteen sub-questions, which would only be asked should the researcher be prompted to do so by the flow of conversation (see Appendix B). Additional questions were developed as needed in situ, according to the semi-structured interview format.

Interviews were the method of choice in a similar study conducted in 2000 by Dobinson and Young, who sought to elucidate then-current ideas of audience engagement and cultural



reception through a series of in-depth interviews with lesbian film viewers. Similar to the present study, Dobinson and Young's research was concerned with practices of reading lesbian possibilities into mainstream film through the subversion of dominant images as informed by lesbian-specific perspectives and contexts. By drawing upon the ensuing interviews, Dobinson and Young were able to identify textual elements considered "prime sites" for lesbian identification, such as gender nonconforming female leads (101). Dobinson and Young opted to conduct interviews for the simple reason that previous literature on the subject had not been "drawn from or tested by empirical research, coming rather from the realm of theory and/or authors' personal experience." While the present study seeks to expand on such work, updating it through the integration of new media and the communal components of subversive readings as a primary area of interest, interviews have again been selected for the sake of "moving from conjecture to theoretically-informed empirical sites" (103), with a view to wider replicability.

### **Collaborative Content Analysis**

Content analysis is the systematic study of cultural texts and products via "searching-out [the] underlying themes in the materials being analyzed" (Bryman 2016, 563). Through content analysis, "dominant narratives, images, ideas, and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged": this capacity for content analysis to challenge the messages embedded in the media landscape by exposing said messages has made content analysis a popular method of feminist research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007, 224). While content analysis can be conducted with either a quantitative or a qualitative approach, the present study used exclusively qualitative methods. Although there are benefits to quantitative approaches which "identify patterns in authorship, subject matter, methods, and interpretation" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 155, qtd. in Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007, 228), and which might allow researchers to make generalizable arguments about media content, this study sought to develop a deeper understanding of the processes behind relational subject formation via critical media engagements.

A collaborative, participant-focused approach was chosen, due to this study's focus on individual responses to media they consider formative. Rather than attempting to quantify elements of the materials themselves, I instead sought to understand participants' *responses* to these materials. It was therefore necessary that the participants be actively involved in the analytic process, so that their perspectives might inform all aspects of the research. Similar to

Shapiro, Rios, and Stewart (2010), I believe that not imposing specific topics myself allows participants to guide our conversations to those topics which they, themselves, deem significant, providing richer insights than would have been possible with a more traditional researcher-led approach. However, as previously stated, a short list of conversation prompts was prepared as a contingency, in the event that a participant would welcome conversation starters from the researcher (see Appendix C).

According to Krippendorff (1980), there are six questions which must be addressed in every content analysis to be considered as such:

1. Which data are analyzed?
2. How are they defined?
3. What is the population from which they are drawn?
4. What is the context relative to which data are analyzed?
5. What are the boundaries of the analysis?
6. What is the target of the inferences?

The collaborative element of this analysis arose from the role played by the participants in selecting the materials to be analyzed, assisting in the development of coding units, and establishing the boundaries of the analysis. Participants helped establish these analytic boundaries both through their role in the initial selection of content, and through centring their individual experiences during the research process. As the study was focused on developing an account of individual experiences of relation-forming and meaning-making through media overall, these individual experiences greatly informed the analysis used to create this account.

Although previous examples of such participatory-focused collaborative analyses could not be found, content analysis is, as previously mentioned, a popular method of feminist research, particularly feminist media studies, and the participant-centred approach is consistent with my own feminist research approach.

## **Analysis**

Formal analysis of the data collected through this study was conducted via grounded theory. Grounded theory provides a set of guidelines for the analytic process which makes use of codes as conceptual tools with which to fragment data, define processes in data, and make comparisons among data categories (Charmaz 2011). Although grounded theory begins with the

gathering of inductive data, it continually moves back and forth between analysis and the gathering of *more* data, thereby shaping and refining the analytic process further. Constructionist grounded theory in particular is an adaptation of the original grounded theory method established by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Having adopted a more explicitly constructionist epistemology in my study, constructionist grounded theory offers a useful elaboration because it differs from standard grounded theory in that it emphasizes multiple realities, the respective positions of the researcher and research participants' situated knowledge, and the partiality of data (Charmaz 2011).

Grounded theory was chosen for this analysis due to its flexibility, as the guidelines suggested by grounded theory provide my analysis with structure, while encouraging adaptability and innovation, based upon participant responses. An additional benefit of grounded theory is how it privileges the voices of participants as the source of theorizing, complementing my desire for the research process to be collaborative, and for participant experiences to be validated at the heart of the analysis. Furthermore, although grounded theory necessitates being as open as possible, it also acknowledges the difficulties of letting go of one's preconceptions before embarking on research. I believe that, as all knowledge is fabricated through our interactions with the world around us and that it is impossible to divorce oneself entirely from the world, it is similarly impossible to divorce oneself entirely from one's prior learning for the sake of some imagined objectivity. Grounded theory's recommended stance of "theoretical agnosticism" (Charmaz 2011, 166) – that is, the simultaneous acknowledgement of a researcher's prior learning and subjection of this learning to rigorous scrutiny – therefore, appeals to me as a workable compromise.

Using this foundation of grounded theory, data analysis was able to take place over two stages. The first stage involved collecting participants' accounts. Once all participant interviews were transcribed and verified by participants, I developed thematic codes which were then applied to these transcripts as a means of sorting the data. My analysis of these codes will be the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As described in the methodology chapter of this thesis, participants were recruited via posters placed in strategic public locations, as well as notices posted on the University of Saskatchewan's electronic bulletin board, PAWS. Consequently, all but one of the participants were drawn from a group of volunteers based in the city of Saskatoon. The sole exception was a long-distance participant from California who was a friend of the researcher and expressed an interest in participating in the study. The projected sample size was initially three to five participants; this small number was chosen due to the potentially prohibitive effect concerns about being "outed" might have on an open call for volunteers. Fortunately, I was able to exceed this estimate, being contacted by a total of eight volunteers over the course of the recruitment process. Of these eight volunteers, seven met the criteria for inclusion: the eighth identified as a heterosexual cisgender female who experienced no degree of same-sex attraction, but was nonetheless interested in participating. Upon interviewing this volunteer, I concluded that her interest was noteworthy based on her recognition of inter-subjectivity, due to her description of becoming more relationally competent via queer media over the course of our conversation together. However, as she did not meet the criteria for inclusion, I ultimately decided not to include her data in my final analysis. In this chapter, I aim to introduce the seven other participants and present the data I have collected on their personal media tastes and patterns of engagement. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality. When necessary, quotes have been modified to remove identifying information. Brief descriptions of all named media texts can be found in Appendix D.

### **Introductions to Participants**

As hoped for, the respondents were primarily a heterogenous group. Of the seven interviewed, four identified as women of colour and four as transgender. While all participants volunteered for a study which was advertised to them as a study of lesbian narratives, two identified as bisexual, one identified as pansexual, and one as a Two-Spirit woman, rejecting or selecting an identifier other than the term, 'lesbian.' While participants were generally young, the majority being in their 20s, one was over 50 years in age.

**Marta.** Marta is a soft-spoken, non-white, bisexual university student who identifies as either non-binary or Two-Spirit. She described first being aware of her bisexual identity at a

young age, perhaps at eleven or twelve years old. Marta expressed a strong desire for optimistic queer narratives and had great praise for the Thai romantic comedy film *Yes or No* because of its lighthearted atmosphere and its depiction of a happy ending for its lesbian leads. On the subject of mainstream queer media, Marta had this to say: “I see all these depictions where we’re dying or we have really unhappy endings – I don’t think it should be like that. I see that there is potential. It doesn’t have to be that way. People can do better with their writing.”

**Gillian.** Gillian is a cheerful Mexican 25-year-old bisexual/queer artist who described a lack of articulation as being one of the biggest barriers she faces when it comes to feeling represented by mainstream media: “I think one of the main problems is that, especially for [bisexuality], very rarely have I seen it, and usually when you do, it’s kind of like, they don’t mention the word.” When asked about media which has been formative for her current identity, Gillian did not cite any specific titles, instead naming the affordances provided by video games which allowed her to play as male: “I default male, even though I know when you play this game what you’re gonna get outta that is kinda like, ‘Now you’re only set to romance a female; you’re only set to do these things.’ It never really crossed my mind to play any differently. I was just okay with this. And then, later, I would replay female and do all the counterparts....I guess what I want to say is that I didn’t see it as odd to do this, you know?” Gillian requested the pseudonym Gillian.

**Laura.** Laura is a friendly 52-year-old Two-Spirit woman whose Indigenous identity has played a major role in how she has come to identify over the years. She described not even knowing the term Two-Spirit until recently, with discussions of gender and sexuality being taboo in her household growing up. Texts such as the poetry of Ivan Coyote have allowed her to both better articulate her experiences and to connect with her Indigenous community through teaching and outreach: “The good information, I bring that back. It’s not mine to keep, it’s mine to share. And that’s technically how First Nations people functioned and worked. We didn’t hoard information; we shared it so that we can all be healthy and well-rounded people.”

**Violet.** Violet is a South Asian transgender lesbian in her 20s with a passion for stories that she seeks to express through her own writing. Over the course of our interview, Violet named the video game *Doki Doki Literature Club* as the queer text currently most important to her – not because of the text itself, but because of the community which has formed around it and

the queer readings it has enabled. Violet has a particular interest in the imaginary potentials of metafictional video games such as *Doki Doki Literature Club* and views fanfiction as a related site of exploration and play: “It’s always nice to get really invested in something. I think that’s sort of a common experience for everyone who might have a busier life, but I guess I still have a busy life and I still like to get invested in things. I really enjoy being invested in stories. Stories are just amazing.”

**Aura.** Aura is a gregarious and energetic pansexual woman in her early 20s who was eager to discuss her tastes in media. She joked readily about attachments to particular characters and stories that struck her as queer in hindsight and credited multiple texts with helping to shape who she is now. She spoke most passionately about the comedy-horror podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*, praising both the queer characters featured on the show itself and the strong allyship demonstrated by its creators: “they’re just such amazing people. If you listen to them off the show talk about it, they’re very adamantly supportive of queer fans. ... Just seeing that unbridled support means so much.”

**Bridget.** Bridget is a disabled 24-year-old white cisgender female who identifies as either lesbian or queer depending on the context. She named Ellen Page’s coming out as one of her most formative queer experiences: “She came out and she spoke about how even though she wasn’t lying to anyone by saying that she was heterosexual, she was ‘lying by omission’ and that really spoke to me. And I think it was shortly after that that I came out myself.” Bridget expressed a strong desire for variety in queer female representation but seemed happy with the direction mainstream media currently appears to be going: “I really appreciate this diversity of queer media that we are seeing now. I think it’s not quite perfect; I don’t know that if it ever will be – there are definitely still aspects of it that are problematic – but I think overall it’s really encouraging to see this really diverse depiction of queer women’s stories in media, where these queer women are multifaceted human beings who exist outside of their queer identity.”

**Sarah.** Sarah is 20 years old and identifies as either queer, gay, or lesbian depending on context. However, she also notes that she is “pretty privileged in every other way,” self-describing as white, able-bodied, and middle class. She described a history of being “fascinated” by gender nonconforming female characters from a young age: “None of them were really queer. I think most of them were just attractive women. Some of it was just like women who would

break out of gender norms in other ways. They wouldn't be queer, but they – like Jade from *Victorious* – you know how she's more assertive in her relationship with guys.” Sarah connected with these characters for seemingly not needing to base their lives around men, which inspired her to consider new possibilities for her own life.

### **Narratives Claimed by Participants**

A number of varied themes emerged in participants' descriptions of their feelings on queer narratives and relationships with media. As might be expected, differences in personal experiences mean that no two participants expressed their narrative preferences in consensus; however, through iterative examination of the participants' words, it soon became apparent that there were common threads binding many of their experiences together. I have grouped these threads into three main themes, each with their own collection of subordinate themes. These main themes are *Narratives Claimed by Participants*, *Alternative Readings*, and *Affect-Based Economies in Fandom*.

The first theme, *Narratives Claimed by Participants*, addresses the first of my research questions: how do queer women recognize, define, and claim queer narratives in the forms of mainstream media that speak to them? In this section, I will explore the narrative elements for which participants expressed the strongest attraction and desire, namely the articulation of queer identities, the normalization of those identities, and an increased focus on characterization. When these three elements come together, they create the impression of “authenticity,” a term which I am here defining as the optimal expansive relationship between the self and all of the possibilities which await that self in motion out in the world.

The second theme, *Practices of Alternative Reading*, addresses the second of my research questions: how might queer women interact with mainstream media and popular culture in ways that serve both their individual development and their collective communities? In this section, I will expand upon the generation of alternative readings as a common practice among queer women. I believe alternative reading is frequently reparative in nature, seeking to instill queer possibilities into narratives which yield little or none on their own. I will also ask how we might understand this practice using Hall's encoding/decoding model, particularly in circumstances wherein (from the perspective of the reader) participants are neither negotiating with nor opposing the producer. To this end, I discuss how fandoms function as shared imaginary spaces

in which queer individuals might develop and refine their respective interpretive codes.

The final theme, *Alternative Economies*, addresses the third of my research questions: how might the affordances provided by new media influence queer engagements with popular culture? In this section, I explore how new media has led to the emergence of shared affect as both a currency and commodity in fandom spaces, as well as what the implications of this might be.

**Articulations of queerness.** Explicit representation was one of the primary themes identified by participants as significant when it comes to measuring the value of a queer narrative. Participants defined “explicit” queer representation as that which is clearly articulated as such within a given text. The degree to which said articulation is emphasized was frequently conflated with the perceived authenticity of said representation by participants, regardless of how much focus was given to characters or themes which might otherwise be reasonably interpreted as queer. For example, Marta cited the Netflix animated series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* as an example of a questionably lesbian text. The program, a reboot of the 1985 animated series *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, has gained significant acclaim for the incorporation of queer themes into its fictional universe, such as through relationships between female characters that have been confirmed as romantic by staff. However, Marta complained that “it hasn’t been explicitly stated,” despite creator Noelle Stevenson’s own status as a lesbian. From Marta’s perspective, Stevenson’s sexuality is not enough to make the queerness in *She-Ra* feel satisfying, because that queerness has not been named as such within the show itself. While lesbian themes are prominent, so long as queer language is not used, Marta expressed a belief that there remains room for doubt that calls the program’s ambiguously lesbian status into question. In comparison, Marta praised the 2010 Thai romantic comedy film *Yes or No* for its overt depiction of lesbian characters, stating “they’re actually gay as opposed to the shows I’ve watched where I’m speculating and I think they’re probably gay, but it hasn’t been stated clearly.”

The aversion participants expressed towards queerness that is not overtly articulated is likely a response to mainstream media’s tendency to prioritize the preservation of plausible deniability when it comes to queer characters. This prioritization is often reflected in the phenomenon colloquially referred to as “queerbaiting,” in which “those officially associated with a media text court viewers interested in LGBT narratives ... and encourage their interest in the media text without the text ever definitively confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant



characters” (Ng 2017). While not all queer relationships that are limited to subtext are necessarily examples of queerbaiting, it is an infamous marketing technique with which many queer fans are familiar. Marta pointed to author J.K. Rowling as an example of a creator whose actions could be understood as queerbaiting, at one point asking, “You know *Harry Potter* and the author making Dumbledore gay, but then not expanding on it?” during our interview. This statement suggests that despite Rowling’s now-infamous announcement about Dumbledore’s sexuality (Coggan 2019), her failure to meaningfully integrate his sexuality into the text of the books themselves invalidates him as an example of queer fictional representation. Similarly, although *She-Ra* has arguably been more successful than *Harry Potter* when it comes to integrating queerness into its fictional world, the creators’ failure to articulate the characters’ queerness definitively within the text, potentially invalidates them as meaningful examples of what participants would deem authentic fictional queer representation.

Gillian also referenced queerbaiting in our interview together, this time in the context of a discussion of DLC (that is, “downloadable content”) in the *Disgaea* video game franchise.

An odd thing happens in the game where in the main storyline there are jokes about how some characters could be taken as being queer, but when it comes to the DLC they tend to sell extra storylines of those characters with the idea that you can see more instances of being together with that same sex character. They’re surprisingly well written too and I know its what me and some fans tend to latch onto and want to take as canon queer characters.

According to Gillian, queerness exists primarily within the main *Disgaea* franchise for the sake of comic relief, yet paid DLC bonus scenarios use the promise of intentionally encoded queerness to entice players to purchase supplementary content, clearly an exploitative practice.

My interest, when first embarking on this project, initially lay in what I perceived to be new media’s liberatory potential – as culture becomes increasingly digital, the lines between audience and producer become increasingly blurred. In the case of video games, in particular, audience agency and active negotiation between player and text is often a requirement for even using the text in question to begin with (Shaw 2017). The necessity of interactivity grants audiences a higher degree of control than could previously have been observed in less immediately interactive media forms, despite how said control remains limited by the affordances of a given text. I, therefore, hoped that new media might be capable of functioning as a site of resistance in the face of capital’s ever-growing grip on art and culture, yet Gillian’s anecdote

serves as a grim reminder that the liberatory potential of new media necessarily coexists with the potential for exploitation. The nature of DLC as “bonus” queer content provides the player with the illusion of control over their narrative experience through the active selection or dismissal of particular character and/or story elements; however, the player is provided even this small amount of control over the narrative at a price.

“**Not a big deal.**” Although participants appeared to value overt articulations of queer identity highly, they simultaneously (and seemingly paradoxically) appeared to value queer representations which were naturalized or normalized within fictional settings to the point of their presence being almost minimized, highly as well. When asked to provide examples of queer texts and explain their lesbian appeal, participants almost universally praised a lack emphasis being placed on queer identities. When discussing the film *Yes or No*, Marta returned to this idea multiple times, expressing pleasure over how characters “talked about it like it wasn’t a big deal” and how the film introduced only an abbreviated account of a possible conflict related to a character’s identity – “I remember at the end, her mother is an obstacle but they get through that pretty quickly. In about thirty, less minutes.” Similarly, while discussing the podcast *The Magnus Archives*, Gillian had the following to say:

What makes all these characters important to me is that, the show itself is a horror first. Like there’s a storyline and all the characters who get to be there just happen to be queer. It’s very casual when it brings up their partners, no one in the story ever pauses to questions or points out the queerness, it is just accepted as the norm.

Language such as “wasn’t a big deal” and “just happen to be” both serve to reflect the downplayed emphasis on the queerness present in the texts named by participants. What such language suggests is that participants are drawn not simply to *queer characters*, but *characters who are queer – and complex*. The distinction between the two is subtle but important and can perhaps be illuminated by the follow account from Gillian:

Usually when I do see canon representation, depending on who’s writing it, they end up being...they’re not a person. They’re just gay, lesbian, or bi. It’s a weird thing where it’s like, that’s just their personality and they’re not allowed to be anything else so that’s why sometimes I have problems with...*liking* these characters even though I want to. I’m like “finally” and half the time I’m not satisfied.

Gillian is describing a dissatisfaction with claims to queer representation which are restricted *to* an act of representation – a queer identity which becomes the sole framework through which a character is understood, often in the absence of other meaningful elements of

characterization. It is almost a counterpart to the Dumbledore problem identified by Marta. With Dumbledore, the problem was a failure by the author to reflect his queer identity meaningfully within the text, whereas the kind of framing referenced by participants reflects instead a tendency to centre a character *solely* around their queer identity, thereby stripping them of humanity and depth.

A variation of this mindset can be seen in the notion expressed by Marta that heterosexuality could, in some circumstances, even be considered a writing flaw. Thus, desiring queerness is considered on the same level as simply desiring good writing, where impatience with heteronormativity is considered to operate on the same level as impatience with lazy or cheap writing. For example, when describing the character Sakura from the Japanese anime and manga franchise *Naruto*, Marta said “In the end, she ends up with that man, even though throughout the series he’s never taken an interest in her, he’s tried to kill her a few times – they just have no romantic chemistry – but the author just decided to write them together because...because bad writing.” Similarly, when discussing the manga *Fruits Basket*, Marta said “...and some of the other woman characters, they seem like they might be gay as well, but they end up in relationships with men that also aren’t very healthy either ... I don’t think it was very good writing because, knowing the character, that’s not something she would have done.” These critiques paint the heteronormativity of these respective series’ endings as symptomatic of a failing on the part of the writers – at least, so it appears from the perspective of queer audience members who do not believe these endings to have been justified or earned.

In expressing a desire for normalized queer content, participants can be understood as attempting to convey a desire for an increased queer presence in stories which possess merit *beyond* particular aesthetics or conventions, a finding which runs contrary to my previously-held belief that there might be particular narrative tropes which appeal to queer audiences more than others, thereby explaining the queered attachment some individuals can form to mainstream heteronormative media. This may correspond with how the predominant medium through which queer subjectivities are produced may shift over time in accordance with evolving technology, resulting in different degrees of access to queer media, which, in turn, may affect how audiences seek and respond to said media. Media franchises are now also becoming more common, resulting in the gradual homogenization of what is widely available.

**Individuals at the centre.** Earlier, I cited Marilyn Farwell’s question “where is the ‘lesbian’ in the lesbian narrative?” as being one of the driving lines of inquiry in my research. The two potential answers suggested by Farwell are (a) that a lesbian narrative is one in possession of identifiably lesbian authors, readers, and/or characters (Farwell 4-5) or (b) that a lesbian narrative is one in which a relationship between two feminines is portrayed – a postmodern response that does not necessitate an explicitly lesbian presence within the narrative. As one of my interests was in how my participants themselves defined the phrase “lesbian narrative,” my interview instrument was purposefully designed to be ambiguous. By this, I mean that clarification was not provided for questions such as “tell me about a queer story that is important to you” in the hopes that participants would be encouraged to draw their own conclusions as to whether I was referring to stories with queer characters and/or creators or to stories with themes and/or aesthetics which they personally interpreted as queer.

However, I consistently placed emphasis on the notion of queer *stories*. I believed it theoretically possible for there to be particular narrative patterns or story structures which uniquely appealed to queer female audiences in ways that did not appeal to heterosexual and/or male audiences. In making such questions a part of my interview protocol, I hoped to invite my participants to tell me about these stories, presuming that such narratives could be found. What I found instead was that many participants did not centre the narrative aspect of queer narratives in their understanding of them as significant at all. Rather, their focus consistently remained on the characters. The sole exception over the course of seven interviews was Marta, who described the Korean film *The Handmaiden* as being uniquely important to her because of its themes of patriarchal abuse and how these themes relate to her own life.

The other participants primarily named texts whose personal significance to them was directly linked to the presence of characters towards whom they felt an attachment. Often this was on the basis of a character’s queer identity. For example, Laura named the historical drama film *Little Big Man* as a significant queer text for her, but when asked why, the sole reason provided was the main character’s Two-Spirit status and the potential usefulness of the film as a teaching tool for those who might be unfamiliar with Two-Spirit identities. Alternatively, participants expressed an attachment toward characters whom they believed could be *interpreted* as queer, such as Violet, who provided the example of the anime series *Lucky Star*, which features no romantic plotlines, but which Violet pointed to as the first instance of her recognizing

what she believed to be subtextual romantic potential between two characters of the same gender. Although patterns could be identified in the kinds of characters most likely to be interpreted by participants as queer – such as those defined by their strength and resilience, their gender nonconformity, and their intimate relationships with at least one peer of the same gender – no particular genre or narrative trope seemed to make participants more likely to seek out queer characters in the first place. This perspective was indicated by such statements as Aura’s praise for one character’s comfort with her sexuality (“not even queer sexuality, just actual sexuality, being herself”) and Bridget’s description of her attachment to female characters she describes as “assertive.”

If there is a recurring theme to be identified in the heterogeneity of the texts and genres of greatest interest to the participants in this study, I would argue that the prevailing theme is *diversity*. Although specific narrative patterns, contexts, and structures did not appear to hold particular interest for all participants, the desire for variety was prominent throughout, as demonstrated by this excerpt from my conversation with Bridget:

I know it’s a little bit cliché and it’s definitely problematic in some aspects, but what I really loved about [*Orange is the New Black*] is that because there are so many queer characters in this show, it’s not just one token character – that allows for a deeper exploration of their stories and of their backgrounds and their struggles and their accomplishments. In a way, that just feels a little more authentic than when it’s just a single queer character in a movie or TV show and the focus is on their queer identity and not on them as a whole person. So I like that show for that reason.

In this excerpt, Bridget articulates her belief that *Orange is the New Black*’s multiplicity of queer characters allowed the program to pursue a richer depiction of queerness than is the norm for mainstream television program, resulting in something which felt “more authentic” to her as a viewer. A similar belief was expressed in a later interview with Sarah when she was asked what sort of queer representation she would like to see more often:

I think ideally just showing a bunch of different types of lesbians would be great. It’s not that that type of lesbian doesn’t exist, it’s just – can we have all of them first? It’s like having only one type – like if it’s always a bisexual person cheating. Not saying that bisexual people don’t cheat, it’s just – ideally having a bunch of different types so it doesn’t feel like this is the only type. Like tokenizing. It feels like a lot of the time queer people are tokenized. And that’s not say people aren’t like that, it’s just that not all queer people are like that. And that’s every minority.

The marginalization of queer identities, particularly queer female identities, in mainstream society means that even in the context of queer media, representations are limited and frequently based on stereotypes. These limitations are, in fact, the circumstances which drove me to this line of questioning to begin with: what is most desired when existing queer representation fails to resonate with queer audiences – in other words, when what is presented feels inauthentic? The answer appears to be far simpler than I would have guessed – what is desired is authenticity.

**Authenticity.** “Authenticity” is a problematic term. In the tradition of subcultural studies, authenticity “was initially used in the realist sense, as an antonym for inauthentic, mass, consumer culture” (Williams 2011, 140). In the context of this study, the term carries connotations of reliability and accuracy and could arguably be understood as referring to faithful media representations of queer lives. Yet the very notion of “faithful representation” implies the existence of queer lives which are simplistic and static enough to be fully encapsulated in the media format of choice. Human beings are, of course, much more complicated than that, and the notion of humans as objects in possession of replicable essential attributes runs counter to my constructionist epistemology.

When my participants refer to “authenticity,” they seem to be referring to the authenticity conceived of by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who himself was influenced by the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard expressed the belief that we are each to “become what one is” (1992 [1846], qtd. in Varga and Guignon 2014), with said *becoming* consisting of the act of relating to something external to the self, giving diachronic coherence to our lives and providing the basis for the narrative unity of the self (Davenport 2012, qtd. in Varga and Guignon). Heidegger echoes this perspective with what he called *Dasein*, translated as “being-there” (*Seinsverhältnis*; Heidegger 1962 [1927], qtd. in Varga and Guignon). *Dasein*, too, refers to a relational mode of being: “a relation that obtains between what one is at any moment and what one can and will be as the temporally extended unfolding of life into a realm of possibilities” (Varga and Guignon, para. 26).

Authenticity, according to Heidegger, is the act of taking responsibility for one’s life and enacting one’s life role with direction and purpose, caring about who and what we are becoming. In taking that responsibility, we take a stand for who we are, and in taking such a stand, we are able to live with something approximating authenticity. In other words, authenticity lies not in the manifestation of particular essential traits believed to comprise our “true” selves, but in the

manifestation of human agency, with our selves becoming true so long as they are the selves that we have affirmed in action— a process, rather than a state of being. Authenticity in media representation of queer-identified characters, then, would lie not in the accurate replication of essential queer traits, which do not exist, but in the representation of this process of *becoming* authentic and the expression of the human agency necessary to engage in it.

What I wish to draw particular attention to by invoking the notion of *Dasein* is the relation between what one is and what one can/will be in the future. Central to Heidegger's philosophy is the notion of the self in motion through time, with authenticity being derived from taking responsibility for the direction one's self is moving in. Fictional characters cannot, of course, claim accountability over the direction of their character arcs, nor can they claim personal agency in their fictionalized lives, although the narratives they inhabit might seek to emulate the appearance of human agency for the sake of realism. What this study has led me to conclude is that authenticity in media representation lies not only in reliability or accuracy, but in representing this relation between the self and the myriad of possibilities awaiting the self in motion as it projects itself into the future. What queer audiences recognize in the characters and narratives they may instinctively describe as "authentic" is not an accurate portrayal of essential queerness – again, no human experience can be distilled down into something so simplistic – but rather characters and narratives which represent broader possibilities than those limited stereotypes which have become the norm.

This definition of media authenticity as the representation of possibilities rather than an accurate portrayal of an essential experience is why I believe so many of the participants in this study expressed an attachment, not towards any particular narrative pattern, but instead towards diversity and novel characterization, as was the case with Bridget when discussing the spectrum of queer presence in *Orange is the New Black*. Such shows resonate with queer female audiences, not because they have tapped into any one essential well of queer existence, but instead because their cast includes a multiplicity of queer-identified women and, consequently, a multiplicity of queer potentials. Returning to my original concern – what do audiences do when media representations of female queerness feel inauthentic? – the answer becomes "they seek more diverse representations."

**The possibility of happiness.** Marta emphatically praised *Yes or No* for its lighthearted atmosphere and happy ending, explicitly remarking “I don’t see too much of that” and observing that, at the time of her first viewing of the film, it was more common for queer media to be “very white or very sad” and “kind of moody” (the 2013 melodrama *Blue is the Warmest Color* was offered as one such example). For Marta to have formed this degree of attachment to a film primarily because of its lighthearted atmosphere suggests a deficiency which *Yes or No* managed to redress in a way that has not, from her experience, often been replicated.

Participants indicated two main reasons for this common attraction to lighthearted, optimistic atmospheres. The first is that lightheartedness is viewed by participants as a significant enough departure from the mainstream norm for them to find it uniquely compelling, as demonstrated by the frequency with which Marta noted that *Yes or No* was not like other queer films to which she had been exposed. When noting that queer cinema is often “moody,” Marta expressed a desire for more genre film, saying “I want to see all kinds of things. Like, I want to see romantic comedies, I want to see lighter content.” This, along with participants’ praising of media in which non-normative sexual identities are casually integrated and treated as secondary to the central narrative, suggests a strong desire for queer-affirmative genre fiction in general, because queer women are part of the world, and should be written in as such. While Marta expressed a preference for romantic comedies, Gillian’s own example of a queer narrative in which the identities of the characters were secondary to the storyline, *The Magnus Archives*, is supernatural horror. It can likely be assumed that the genres sought by queer women are as diverse as the identities of the women themselves, but what is certain is this: that existing mainstream queer narratives, for the most part, do not sufficiently capture the diversity of queer women’s lives and potentials.

As well as feeling drawn to narratives which are optimistic or lighthearted, simply for the departure from the norm they represent, participants expressed a desire to be able to experience a positive connection between what they were reading, viewing, and/or playing and their own lived experiences. I find it significant that Marta used the word *we* when commenting on the rarity of happy endings for gay couples – “I try to look at mainstream media and I see all these depictions where we’re dying or we have really unhappy endings.” Through her use of the word *we*, Marta appears to be incorporating these unhappy queer subjects into her personal and community identity, and so is made to feel personal and shared distress by their unhappy fates. This is despite



the fact that Marta followed up her statement with the assertion, “I don’t think it should be like that. I see that there is potential. It doesn’t have to be that way.” This demonstrates a degree of cognitive awareness of the negative impact queer deaths in media can have on queer audiences and serves as a powerful call to action for creators seeking to write queer stories of their own.

### **Practices of Alternative Reading**

At this point, I would like to transition from the topic of what queer audiences desire in queer narratives to the matter of what queer audiences *do* when faced with narratives in possession of undesirable elements. As I have hopefully already made clear above, I believe it is a common practice for queer audiences to engage in what I have been referring to as alternative reading – a reading of a text which challenges, resists, or reimagines the presumed heteronormative reading, similar to Hall’s negotiated and oppositional audience position. Over the course of my interviews, I have received what I believe to be confirmation that alternative reading is indeed a common practice, although many of my participants either did not refer to this practice using any specialized vocabulary, or instead referred to the phenomenon using the fandom slang term “headcanon.”

**Aberrant coding.** The term “headcanon” refers to an individual’s idiosyncratic interpretation of a media text when compared to that which is commonly understood to be the official or authentic (also known as “canon”) reading. While participants generally expressed an emphatic preference for texts which did not require the process of alternative reading to begin with, they were nonetheless familiar with the notion, to the extent that several participants joked about it being a form of self-indulgence or even delusion on their part.

My line of questioning on alternative reading was intended to illuminate potential common threads across texts that served as foundational for this practice. As previously stated, although patterns could be identified in the kinds of characters more likely to be interpreted by participants as queer (namely gender nonconformity and the possession of intimate relationships with other characters of the same gender), no strict pattern could be identified in the narratives themselves. Instead, a desire for novelty could be observed, often manifesting as a search for diversity. This desire for novelty and diversity can be linked to one potential motive I have identified for alternative reading: the desire to “fix” the flaw of homogenous compulsory heteronormativity, per Adrienne Rich’s coinage (1980).

Marta described her alternative reading in almost reparative terms, saying “I see a lot of gay people just kind of taking back these characters and reworking their stories to be better.” In this context, “better” appears to refer to freedom from hetero- and cisnormativity:

Because it’s an older series, there’s some depictions of gay or trans characters that’s not very good either. ... Because there’s one character who seems very much like he’s a gay man who is in denial about himself and he’s written to be this way. But then he ends up with a woman. And some of the other woman characters, they seem like they might be gay as well, but they end up in relationships with men that also aren’t very healthy either. One of them is a high schooler and the other is an adult man. I don’t think it was very good writing because, knowing the character, that’s not something she would have done. (on *Fruits Basket*; see Appendix D)

In such situations, alternative reading appears to become an almost compensatory practice, allowing queer audiences to salvage what they perceive as a narrative’s wasted potential. This potential is, of course, “wasted” through the writer assigning heterosexuality or cisnormativity to a context where the audience feels it does not belong. This belief was expressed in no uncertain terms by multiple participants who describe instances of oppositional reading on their part as being largely motivated by frustration, such as in Marta’s description of the eventual fate of the character Sakura from the series *Naruto*:

In the end, she ends up with that man, even though throughout the series he’s never taken an interest in her, he’s tried to kill her a few times – they just have no romantic chemistry, but the author just decided to write them together because...because bad writing.

I have no interest in arguing whether or not the presence of compulsory heteronormativity in a text actually does constitute “bad writing,” as some of my participants have expressed, although I will note that Marilyn Farwell’s observation that the lesbian becomes “logically impossible” through the western plot’s dependence on oppositional and hierarchical relationships between men and women likely serves as an explanation for how some queer audiences might be driven to reimagine these plots for the sake of *making* the lesbian possible. That is, after all, what alternative reading is fundamentally about. What is of greater interest to me is the reluctance demonstrated by participants to categorize their alternative readings as a conscious, wilful practice on their part.

When joking about her inclination to project queerness onto female characters even when they are in heterosexual relationships with men, Marta stated that she “can’t read it as straight.” This phrasing suggests that she did not view her behaviour as a form of “reading against the

grain,” but instead as something recuperative which entailed her uncovering an interpretation that already existed within the text and which she and the text’s producer were simply in disagreement about. A similar attitude was revealed over the course of my interview with Aura when she confidently described Hamlet as the “OG bisexual in proper literature:”

The closeness and the language that he uses when he talks to Horatio, as well as, like – cuz he obviously loves Ophelia – well, I don’t know that it’s obvious he loves her, but he has feelings for her in some way, shape, or form. He talks to Horatio, in my opinion, in a similar way and with similar language to which he talks to Ophelia. And so – I dunno, he just reads so much bisexual. He exuded bisexuality to me.

Aura emphatically attributes Hamlet’s bisexuality to Hamlet as an independent subject and not to her personal interpretation of the text *or* to Shakespeare as an author – he *is* the “OG bisexual.” This is despite the fact that Hamlet (not surprisingly, given the historical context) fails to articulate the kind of explicit queerness for which most of the participants expressed a clear desire. Instead, Aura attributed her reading of Hamlet as bisexual to an innate quality of his character which she was able to perceive through his articulations to his peers.

This form of alternative reading diverges from the audience positions outlined by Stuart Hall, which remain complicit with the belief that the producer remains the ultimate authority over the text to which the audience either bows or resists. To view oneself as being in disagreement with the author is neither to actively oppose nor negotiate with them; instead, the reader is seeking to ignore them entirely. As this form of decoding arguably derives from the author and the reader not sharing a common social position, it might be considered a form of “aberrant decoding,” a phrased coined by Umberto Eco to describe situations in which a text is interpreted using a different code than that which was used to encode it.

Examples of aberrant coding “range from the ignorance of the original codes (as when the Achaean conquerors misinterpreted Cretan symbols) to the overlay or imposition of later codes upon a message (as when early Christians overlaid a Christian meaning upon a pagan symbol or ritual, or when post-romantic scholars find erotic images in what an earlier poet conceived of as philosophical allegories)” (Fiske, qtd. in Munteanu 2012). While aberrant coding can take place in such literal circumstances as a lack of familiarity with the language one is attempting to decode, it can also arise when an individual occupies a different social position than the original encoder and thereby interprets their message from a different standpoint, using a different belief system and/or a different cultural context as their point of reference. I would argue that when

queer individuals make claims such as those expressed by Marta and Aura, who do not appear to view their alternative reading as reactionary, but rather as the observing of potentials inherent to the text which the author has not explored, their readings would constitute a form of aberrant decoding using codes which stem from their marginalized positions as queer women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada.

**The fandom imaginary.** My focus thus far has largely been on alternative reading as a highly individualized activity wherein single readers enact their respective interpretive powers to prescribe new meanings to existing texts. However, interpretation rarely, if ever, takes place in total isolation, as demonstrated by how many of my participants reported social discussion being a major part of their preferred modes of media engagement. For example, Aura described herself as loving debates: “We’ll pause the movie or something and then we’ll pick apart different parts that happened. It changes my interpretation but I definitely think it *enhances* the interpretation.” While Sarah did not express the same love of debate, she expressed a similar appreciation for how discussion might enhance one’s understanding, both of the text and of one’s own perspective on the world:

I think those discussions help me to widen my perspective so I’m not just a white queer person watching this and being “oh, this representation is so good,” when it’s not. So I think that’s the main thing. It gives me a better perspective on media.

*Queer Eye*, the most recent season in Japan - I read a lot of criticism on the cultural aspect of it because I watched it and because I don’t know a lot about Japanese culture I was just “Oh, this is nice.” That was really interesting. I don’t know a lot of the cultural aspects of it so I had a hard time critiquing it myself. You could tell some of the time that it was like “Oh, I don’t know if that was the best way to do that.”

In both of the above examples, Sarah’s awareness of her own social location and the positions of others has been heightened through discussion. This heightened awareness allows her to interpret the media series being discussed with a different code than that with which she had interpreted it initially, consequently changing her opinion of the show entirely. This was possible only through communication, but straightforward discussion is not the only way individuals might exchange ideas. It is here where I believe fandom becomes most significant.

The definition I had previously provided for the concept of fandom is “a phenomenon that encourages individuals to collectively and socially unite within a subculture based on shared

interests or appreciation of a media world or product” (Tsay-Vogel 2015, 32). I have further suggested that fandoms might be considered a form of imaginary community, following Hill’s conceptualization of fandom as a common space united by the shared emotional responses of the participants, rather than any singular mass ritual. However, several participants have provided their own definitions of fandom which emphasize a need for active participation. Bridget, for example, remarked: “I don’t know that I’d necessarily consider myself a part of any fandoms, because I think to be a part of a fandom you also need to contribute to it in some way. And I don’t think that I really do that.” Aura built upon this notion of fans as agents:

[Fans are] people who interact, producing fan material. So art, fanfiction, fan podcasts. People who are actively doing stuff. And while some people who aren’t actively doing stuff might consider themselves a part of the fandom – which is totally respectful, I’ve done that, cuz I used to consider myself a part of the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom even though I didn’t produce shit ... it’s kind of just feeling like you belong to that community. Kind of like living in a town as opposed to visiting sometimes.

Aura’s “town” analogy serves to justify her reluctance to consider herself a member of any particular fandom. Like Bridget, while there are many media texts she expressed a passion for, the passivity of her consumption prevents her from considering herself more than a “visitor.” Yet neither of these women provided clarification as to what, precisely, a member of a fandom must “do” to be considered an active contributor. Aura’s response hints at the breadth of possible answers – art, fanfiction, and fan podcasts are but a few examples, and there are countless others implied in the ambiguity of the word “stuff.” Responses such as these have led me to consider fandom as less of a common emotional space than it is a site of production. However, what is being produced are *affects* through which others may shape and refine the aberrant codes with which they engage in their alternative readings. In regards to how best to define “active” participation, the answer, based on participant responses, appears to be that anything which might introduce a new affect into the fandom imaginary, whether it be the production of creative work or discussion with other fans, would be considered a form of “active” contribution.

Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg define affect as “the name we give to those forces ... that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent interactibility” (1). Affect, then, is more than motion, action, or reaction. Rather, affect is the *capacity* to move, act, or react – to

affect the world around us and be affected by the world in turn. It is the name given to those anthropomorphized forces which spur us to *do* and to *be*, existing somewhere in-between or outside of anything as concrete or straightforward as the mere *desire* to do or to be. Given this definition, the link between affect and my offered definition of authenticity becomes apparent, as both are concerned with human drives towards potential. Thus, within the collective fandom imaginary, individuals engage in discussion, critique, and amateur creation inspired by existing texts, in pursuit of alternative affects so that they might similarly be spurred to *do* and *be* and achieve something approximating their desired authentic relations. In doing so, affect and novelty gain value within fandom, simultaneously becoming immaterial forms of affective currencies *and* affective commodities, with “currency” here being defined as a medium of exchange for goods and services and “commodity” being defined as an article of trade or commerce. I believe this increasing marketization of affect is, in part, a product of recent technological advances and their deliberate, built-in capitalization potentials, which leads to my third theme and the last of my three research questions: how might the affordances provided by new media influence queer engagements with popular culture?

### **Alternative Economies**

**The gift economy model.** In my literature review, I described the term “textual poaching” as being flawed due to its connoted suggestion that mainstream cultural producers are the rightful proprietors of the texts under their control and that fans necessarily operate exclusively in the margins of that propriety, thereby preserving the binary separation between audience and producer. I proposed that through practices of alternative reading, fans could potentially re-appropriate the queer aesthetics claimed by mainstream producers to their own ends and interests. As the language of poaching and ownership in regards to cultural texts is inherently capitalistic, such reclamation introduces the potential for the emergence of alternative economies within fandom spaces, begging the question of what sorts of economies might emerge and whether they might adequately serve as potential alternatives to the current destinations of capital (Mohanty 2003).

As the Internet has helped to decentralize some information flows, the potential arises for new media to undermine both knowledge monopolies and individual ownership in mainstream publics. As a result of this decentralization, digital economies have come to be based on access in

lieu of possession, and the economies which sustain fandom spaces, however you define them, could arguably be considered microcosmic examples of such access-based economies. While it is not uncommon for members of fandoms to produce physical goods or perform services such as the creation of commission-based artwork, much fandom activity is restricted to the free exchange of information – generally art, fiction, and theory – with membership in a particular fandom here being defined as access and/or contribution to said information more so than the physical accumulation of objects or the performance of particular ritualized acts, as per Hill’s definition of shared emotional response. In other words, membership in a fandom is defined more by participation in a common affect than it is by the production of transformative works alone; however, it is frequently fan-produced transformative works which *generate* these common affects.

The seemingly free circulation of transformative works within fandom circles has led Pearson (2010) to describe modern fandom as comprising a “gift economy” model. Karen Hellekson (2009) defines gift economies as “gendered [spaces] that [rely] on the circulation of gifts” in ways which deliberately repudiate male-gendered monetary models, thereby permitting the performance of alternative gendered and queered identities (116). As copyright concerns mean fan labourers can rarely attempt to capitalize on their creative works beyond generating custom commissions or producing physical goods with very limited sales, it is clear that fandom spaces are rarely, if ever, made viable through following a standard profit model: rather, they attract individuals who are simply interested in the production and consumption of transformative fan labour. These practises were described by Pearson as constituting an egalitarian, non-hierarchical form of “horizontal creativity.” Yet, as explained in the previous section, I do not believe it to be entirely accurate to suggest either that fandoms are wholly egalitarian, *or* that they are non-hierarchical.

As fandom membership can be defined through participation in a common affect, within the fandom imaginary, affect and novelty gain value and come to constitute a form of immaterial commodity. Consider the following example: an artist posts an illustration on Twitter, available for viewing to any with access to the website itself. A fan of the source material comes across the illustration and retweets it, sharing it with their own audience, and the artist is pleased with the ensuing attention. The sole exchange taking place in these contexts is that of attention. There is no financial or material exchange, and yet the artist’s practice can be considered to have been

sustained.

The above example is hypothetical, and yet there were several non-hypothetical examples given by participants. For example, Violet confessed that, while she does write in part for herself, “fanfiction is kind of easier to get exposure with. More people will read it than if you write your own stories.”

It’s a way for me to express my creativity. That’s something I value a lot. Just being creative and being able to flesh out what ideas I have in my head into writing and having elements of character development and having those characters end up together, but also getting people to comment on your stories and say, “Oh, I think this is a good story” or “Here’s what you can improve.” It also kind of gives me some feedback on my writing because I do want to write out a story and have people read it, kind of enjoy what ideas I had.

While writing is a creative outlet for Violet, she nonetheless desires a positive response from others and is driven in part by her pursuit of that response: “If there is no community, I don’t really have anything to participate in, but even a small community is enough for me to start thinking about whether I want to write in that community.” This suggests that, if fandom does *not* operate on a gift economy model, then the currencies and commodities being exchanged are not the creative works themselves, but rather the sense of validation received by fans for their passion and by creators for their labour.

In comparison, Gillian describes her active participation in fandom as being a side effect of her personal passion for a text, one which she is almost helpless to control: “It’s just like – you’re on a high and you’re just happy to make whatever you want, so you’ll just start producing.” Feedback from others might even lead to circumstances in which she feels compelled to stop: “If I start doing it for other people, it can go into that area where it starts becoming work and it’s not fun anymore for me ... there’s like, the pressure to constantly do more work, keep posting, keep sharing. It takes a lot out of me. I can’t do that.”

Gillian is describing a situation in which she feels active participation in fandom can be *punished* by the responses of others – that is, her participation can lead her to a point where she becomes so dependent on validation from others that she loses sight of personal satisfaction. Losing sight of this personal satisfaction in her creative work would subsequently strip her of the passion Pearson proposes as driving modern fandom. In this scenario, she would come to view creation as mere labour – exhausting and unrewarding when uncompensated. If it is really so easy



for fan labour to shift from a form of creative self-expression to a form of toil, then it cannot be presumed to be an indefinitely self-sustaining practice. This further suggests that fandom economies cannot solely be motivated by passion, as the proposed gift economy model would suggest.

However, an affect-based economy would necessarily consist of the organized management and circulation of existing and novel affects within a particular space. Thus, if fandom is to be theorized as sustained by an affect-based economy, it becomes important to define the boundaries of this space.

**How new media delineates counterpublic spaces.** In Robert Logan's *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (2010), Logan seeks to apply McLuhan's theories of media to developments which McLuhan predicted but did not live to experience himself, proposing a definition of new media as technology which enables a common cognitive space. This is in contrast to mass media, technology that creates a community of common *emotional* space. New media, such as the Internet, is defined by features which allow information, knowledge, and texts to exist almost in motion, through two-way or multi-channel communication, ease of access and dissemination, inter-operability, and more, all of which allow for the rapid exchange and evolution of ideas between two or more parties. The patterns of human interaction which have consequently emerged in the age of new media resemble and replicate traditional patterns of oral communication, albeit in entirely digital contexts, with Logan referring to the Internet as "an electronic dialogue or Symposium similar to the one described by Plato in his dialogues."

Innis (*ibid.*) claimed that societies that used an easily portable writing material such as paper would create an empire that was extensive in space but not in time. ... The Internet uses the lightest possible writing material – namely, electrons – and as Innis suggested, it is extensive in space. In fact, it is global, a global village, and it constantly changing.

The role played by new media in the formation of contemporary queer counterpublics is, simply put, that it provides the environment in which queer individuals may convene and converse, serving as a forum where the kinds of exchanges Logan described may occur, regardless of the physical and financial barriers which might prohibit direct face-to-face interaction. This, however, is where my interpretation of the Internet as oral culture begins to diverge from Logan's.

Central to Logan's thesis is the notion of the Internet as a kind of global village with a

similarly global reach. This reach is responsible for the Internet's de-centralizing effect on information. As access to information is enhanced, the specialist is obsolesced and individual learning is retrieved (Logan 240). In other words, no one person can "own" the information available on the Internet, theoretically eliminating hierarchies. Logan expresses an almost utopic vision of the Internet as "the ultimate participatory democracy," using language to describe the Web's possibilities that, while perhaps a bit optimistic in 2010, might be considered downright laughable a decade later.

In literate society, except for informal discussions between friends, there is always a moderator or a chairperson who leads the discussion and polices the interaction of the participants, whether the discussion is a political meeting or an academic seminar. In both oral society and Internet society, no such structures exist. (241)

Totalitarian regimes cannot exist on the Net. The Internet, in fact, is a safeguard of democracy because it cannot be controlled by the state or the wealthy, in contrast to the press or the broadcast media. You cannot buy the Internet or censor it as you can a newspaper. (242)

As these excerpts demonstrate, Logan's mistake is twofold. First, he presumes that the absence of formal hierarchies means the absence of hierarchical structures altogether, when anyone familiar with schoolyard cliques could tell you otherwise. Second, he presumes equality and neutrality on the part of online actors. His rather bold statement that the Internet "cannot be controlled by the state or the wealthy" is believable only if you imagine that no part of the Internet, no individual website or online service, is managed by a corruptible, self-interested individual or corporation who dictates what activity they permit, suppress, or encourage on the website or service in question. In the era of trolling and fake news, we know this statement to be patently false, and Logan himself briefly brushes against the reason why, without seeming to comprehend the full implications of what he is saying.

In the oral tradition, when a member of society seriously offends the social norms, he or she is not imprisoned or punished, as is the case in literate society; he or she is banished; shut out rather than shut in. The same is the case in the world of the Internet. If a user violates the rules and protocols of Internet usage, he or she is first admonished and warned, usually in the form of a flaming, but if the offense continues, he or she is banned from participation and removed from the discussion group, and his or her e-mail is ignored or blocked. (242)

This is the entirety of the explanation Logan provides for "Electronic Crime and Punishment" in his chapter on the Internet. He fails to question where the "rules and protocols of

Internet usage” originate, with the implication being that those who admonish, warn, flame, and eventually ban other users can only be neutral parties exacting justice on troublemakers. He does not appear to consider the possibility that such protocols can themselves be used as a means of policing discussion and exerting control over his envisioned “Netocracy.” Yet these are precisely the scenarios described by nearly every participant in my study when asked to describe what they perceive to be the drawbacks of participation in contemporary fandom.

Marta, for example, expressed dissatisfaction with her own past fandom experiences. She described fandoms as tending to prioritize positivity over all else: “Lots of people also don’t want you to criticize the content/material at all ... There’s this one series I enjoy, but there’s some genuinely not good things about it. When people want to talk about that, some people accuse these people of wanting to start drama.” In this example, even benign criticism is accused of being “drama” and shut down, causing Marta to make a conscious effort to distance herself from the communities surrounding her favourite texts so that outsiders do not presume her to hold similar values or to behave in such narrow ways: “People from the outside, that’s all they see, even though that’s not what I personally believe I think is okay.”

Violet described similar past experiences with fandom and attributed this resistance to critique in fandom to “groupthink.” However, she noted that the problem was not unique to fandom, but rather one which could arise in *any* group. Regardless, she found the effect to be just as chilling as Marta had: “Just having different opinions is sometimes hard in a community like that ... Sometimes I won’t [express my own opinion] because I think it’s not really worth it to engage.”

Gillian described this phenomenon as being symptomatic of “discourse,” a “[major] problem when it comes to bigger [fan] communities.” In fandom circles, discourse is often used to refer to intense ideological arguments or debates concerning “correctness.” The term is used similarly to Foucault’s definition of discourse as a means of constituting knowledge and producing meaning; however, within fan spaces, the term discourse often also carries with it connotations of arguments that are senseless, petty, and mean-spirited. It is especially so for those who are presumed to be motivated primarily by a desire to control the spaces they occupy. Thus, discourse is frequently attributed to those who “insist that their way is the right way or that you shouldn’t consume this media like that” (a quote from Gillian). When asked to clarify, Gillian provided the following example: “I literally have a friend who makes it their life’s mission to tell

me about certain media. And their opinion really does – sometimes they’ll tell me ‘don’t consume it because of certain reasons’ and then I do because I want to piss them off.”

Efforts to regulate fandom spaces are not limited exclusively to restrictions placed on fan behaviour, either, but increasingly extend to those mainstream producers and creators whose content fans have initially gathered around. What this means is that as the Internet’s global reach has increased individual access to information, it has simultaneously intensified individuals’ regulatory impulses. Aura provided the following example in her explanation for why she does not personally consider herself a member of any current fandoms:

They’re toxic as hell. [The Voltron fandom was] threatening the creators, one of which is a non-binary person, and saying they didn’t make the show queer enough for you, and I’m like “Buddy, listen here, it’s not your show.” And so people annoy me far too much for me to consider myself a part of any fandom that is more than 20 people. Which is basically how I live my life. I consume and I keep my mouth shut and I watch from afar and am like “Ah, this is a shitstorm. I’m going to enjoy when it hits the fan.”

Although fandom provides space for the cultivation of aberrant codes to be used in alternative readings, a process which seems on the surface to be liberatory, its affect-based economy functions similarly to one based on more traditional forms of capital.

Bourdieu distinguished among four types of capital: economic, social (meaning relationships or connections to others), cultural (meaning legitimate situated knowledge), and symbolic capital (meaning prestige and/or status). Participants located in an economy based on any of these forms of capital may not only accumulate said capital, but may also “convert or exchange one for another ... a person with the economic capital to acquire rare vinyl records, for example, may convert that into cultural and/or symbolic capital within a subcultural scene ... subcultural capital confers status-identifiers on the people who possess it” (Williams 2011, 137). Although I am reluctant to use the vocabulary of subcultural theory in my discussion of fandom, having already established what I believe to be the difference between the two in my literature review, comparisons can nonetheless be drawn between subcultural capital’s transmutable properties and fandom’s affective economies. Namely, while subcultural capital may be distinguished by its capacity for conversion into other forms of capital, affective capital may be distinguished by its *combination* of properties, being a form of cultural capital that is used simultaneously to produce relationships and to grant prestige/status within a community.

Similar to any other form of capital, affective capital confers status-identifiers on the

people who possess it, thereby motivating participants in the fandom scene to seek its accumulation. As one accumulates status capital, their power within the economy grows and they increasingly “command access to the profits that are at stake in that field” (Wacquant 1989, 39: qtd. in Williams 2011). In the case of fandom, “profit” refers not necessarily to economic growth, but instead to the affects associated with attention and prestige within that fandom. These affects are not uniformly accessible, nor universally circulated, and this disparity leads to an unequal distribution of power among those able to accrue the resources necessary to control the circulation of affect and those who find themselves restricted. Furthermore, those who hold power in fandom most often appear to exert their power through attempts to homogenize the spaces they occupy: at least, that is the suggestion given by Violet and Gillian’s descriptions of the fandom groupthink phenomenon – a paradox, because those who hold power in fandom appear to have most often gained that power in the first place through transformative works which were themselves intended to generate novel affects for the sake of extending an established canon. If we return to Foucault’s definition of authorship as the mode through which discourse is circulated and value ascribed, this practice could almost be seen as constituting a form of re-mediated authorship through which particular readings of texts become privileged – yet they are only privileged within insular fandom communities and *not* the dominant public, hence the seeming urgency with which those in power in a particular fandom seek to enforce the status quo. After all, if a reading is privileged only within a particular fandom community, theoretically, it would not take much for that reading to become displaced.

Where the phenomenon of attempting to homogenize fandom spaces connects back to new media is this: if, as Nunes wrote in 1995, the virtuality of the Internet means our words become our bodies, then to those we meet and befriend online, all we are *is* our words. Efforts to restrict free discourse in fandom spaces very quickly becomes the sort of policing Logan described as an impossibility online, and those who possess the affective capital necessary to dictate the direction of discourse flows do so while occupying a higher rung on the hierarchical fandom ladder than those they are able to shut out or shut down. The restriction of free discourse translates to the restriction of the digital body with which fans occupy and through which they traverse the fandom imaginary. Thus, it is through representations that the limits of a fandom’s counterpublic become delineated. Similarly, it is through representations that the limits of an affect-based fan economy become imposed, and arguably, exposed.

**The limits of fandom.** Returning to the question of how fandom economies might potentially serve as an alternative to modern capital: increasingly, I have found myself questioning whether they *can*. While fandom certainly marks a point of divergence from traditional consumer capitalism and offers a site of minor resistances for those seeking to challenge the status quo, I continually find myself returning to the sheer exhaustion expressed by a number of my participants. Marta, for example, was guarded in a similar manner to Gillian: “if I start doing it for other people it can go into that area where it starts becoming work and it’s not fun anymore for me. ... There’s like, the pressure to constantly do more work, keep posting, keep sharing. It takes a lot out of me. I can’t do that.” Similarly, Violet expressed that “writing a story is a lot of work, so it ... depends on how much time I have on my hands.” While Aura rejected the idea of participating in fandom mostly because she considers fandom toxic, she also confessed to a lack of time: “I’m busy, honestly... I’m very, very busy. I have a house that I have to maintain and I have a job that I have to maintain. I’m in my fourth year of university so I have a full course load. That’s like the main thing. ... They have a yearly week where everyone just makes fanart and stuff and I haven’t participated since I started university, which is very sad, because I used to participate in it nonstop.” Sarah also expressed a reluctance to consider herself a member of any particular fandom because of the time commitment it would imply: “I don’t have time to keep up with things a lot of the time. I could be in fandoms but it wouldn’t feel like the same type of experience as being *in* it.” These statements all express a similar idea – that however fandom might be idealized by fans and researchers alike as a communal expression of collective passion, it is also a site for labour, and just as with any form of labour, when time is not available for regeneration, the labourer suffers.

Initially I speculated that fandom might provide marginalized communities with the means to reclaim aesthetics and narrative modes appropriated by capital, intervening on the behalf of those muted by mainstream commercial culture. This belief was driven in part by the criticisms I hold of Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* and the titular analogy of fans as poachers rather than creative agents. While I maintain that alternative reading has the revolutionary potential to challenge mainstream cultural boundaries, I have come to believe with my participants that fandoms alone are not sufficient for fulfilling this potential.

The fundamental problem is that anyone who participates in a fan community does so with the word “fan,” itself, referring firstly not to their love of a particular text, but to how we

read in a capitalist society. When one is a fan, the act of reading is at all times linked implicitly to the act of consumption – that is, to the fan’s chosen site of economic and affective investment. Rosemary Hennessy (2018) wrote that capitalism works to undermine the potential for developing class consciousness, instead encouraging citizens to compartmentalize, localize, and de-link from the bigger picture. In this context, class comes to be understood as a category that marks differences in consumption rather than a system of social division. Consequently, justice becomes defined as something culturally constructed which can be achieved through symbolic actions rather than something more socially engaged, which necessitates radical change. However, identity-based economic investments only further reinforce class divisions, and while individual fans and their respective transformative activities might diverge from the normative, these economic investments, nonetheless, remain foundational to all fan activity.

Any interest in the radical potential of alternative readings and the formation of queer counterpublics based around media texts must begin with the question of whether it is possible for transformative work, such as those activities currently engaged in by fans, to exist outside of capitalism. For now, there appears to be less potential for radical growth than a gradual movement toward collapse, the eternal combustion engine of capital. Consider once more Nunes’ statement that the virtuality of the Internet means that our words become our bodies and how this state of discursive collapse may affect those embroiled within these digital economies.

One of the defining features of the Internet is the ability for information, knowledge, and texts to exist almost always in motion, thanks to ever-increasing ease of access and dissemination. Yet, a side effect of this ever-increasing ease of access is that information circulates at a faster rate than ever before, meaning that ideas, too, evolve at a rapid pace. The effect is similar to John Urry’s suggestion that ever-expanding networks of technologies and technological agents may eventually shrink time-space (Urry 1998, qtd. in Mohanty 2003). As media speeds up the flow of information and disinformation, its effects on human interaction speed up as well, manifesting in how this sped-up flow of information has led to a sped-up capacity to access and process it. If our words are our bodies, then the toll of exhausting labour on our virtual bodies becomes intensified as well. Social, cultural, and symbolic capital within fandom spaces can be accumulated at a previously unthinkable rate, and the homogenizing power of fandom discourse can be exerted at a previously unthinkable rate as well.

Those, such as the queer women at the heart of my study, do not possess universal access

to the means of accumulating virtual power and the toll can be witnessed in their cautionary claims. Fans such as Marta, Aura, and Sarah are weary, and as a result, they, and likely others, have decided that they no longer wish to identify as fans at all, prioritizing their well-being as individuals within more intimate social circles, over the broader community once promised by the fandom imaginary. Whatever radical potential fandom may have once held for them has been compromised.

**Countering fandom hegemony.** Having offered partial answers to the questions which have driven this research, I would like to provide another possible perspective on the matter of alternative economies and fandom. My working definition of fandom, thus far, has been “a community or subculture based on shared interests or appreciation of a cultural product that is often characterized by active emotional engagement rather than passive consumption.” I am hoping that my analysis has helped to demonstrate how, while such communities often hold radical potential due to their inherently conflictual relation with the dominant public, they are simultaneously at risk of reproducing internal hegemonies – which cannot be considered inherently radical. For example, while not all fans are white, it is white fans who are most often positioned to accrue the sort of subcultural capital which can amass power within fandoms, meaning that so long as fandoms are at risk of reproducing hegemony, they are at risk of reproducing white supremacy.

Yet while fandom’s radical potentials may be compromised by the reproduction of social hegemonies, the radical potential itself remains present in the very act of alternative reading. I am therefore driven to consider how fans might use their shared experiences to shape counterpublic communities better equipped to resist capitalist hegemonies. While over half of my participants identified as women of colour, meaning any one of their perspectives could potentially serve as an introductory model to a non-white fandom alternative, Laura stood out as providing the most definitive account of what such an alternative might look like.

To begin, Laura distinctly rejected the term fandom when describing her experiences. The reason she provided was simply that she sees no need to actively involve herself in a specialized community when she is already so involved in her Indigenous community in other ways, from “hand drumming to beading classes to coaching baseball to food safety to running the Hep C group. [Her] hands are everywhere.” To participate in fandom would be to extend herself even further, but more than that, she lacks the desire to separate her interests from her embodied self:



“I don’t want to be that specific ... I don’t wanna have all these accolades, all these titles, because we’re a titled society. I just wanna be myself. I don’t wanna be that Two-Spirited gay or lesbian person. I just wanna be myself.”

Yet despite Laura’s reluctance to isolate her interests, she expressed a strong interest in media and popular culture. For example, during our interview, she described herself as feeling a deep connection with the character of Wonder Woman, jokingly referring to the character as her friend group’s “leader.” Furthermore, she consistently expressed a desire for a space in which she and others like herself (that is, Two-Spirit and lesbian Indigenous women) could converge, doing so most overtly when discussing her own and her friend’s shared fantasy of living in Wonder Woman’s “woman’s world.” Although she noted that queer women have been more normalized and better integrated into mainstream society in recent years, Laura observed that they continue to lack a unique, specialized space, a desire which might be considered at least adjacent to the desire for a lesbian counterpublic. Thus, while Laura expressed disinterest in fandom, that disinterest should not be mistaken for a disinterest in communal media engagement.

Laura stated that she often “translates” mainstream media into something queer through alternative reading, using the example of the characters Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* to clarify her meaning: “Very much like I also think Bert and Ernie are gay. ... Most people wouldn’t think Bert and Ernie are like – to them, it’s ‘Where do you come up with this stuff?’ It doesn’t click. ... I don’t know how they cannot figure that out.” Later, Laura added, “I often use Bert and Ernie as an analogy to my straight friends and they’re like ‘Oh, I actually never thought of it.’” This language of analogy came up several times during our conversation and was always used in the sense of communicating queer experiences to those without a known queer context of their own. In a way, my research has been very individualistic, investigating how individual lesbians might better connect with subaltern queer communities through media texts in collaborative contexts, yet Laura presents an inversion of this premise, approaching media first and foremost as a teaching tool for reaching out to those even beyond her own local, insular queer community.

Laura expressed a belief that her Indigenous heritage has played a significant role in this desire of hers to confront silence and overcome ignorance. Through learning to speak up, she says, Indigenous people can “[regain] something we had lost.”

As a Two-Spirit female in my culture, rites of passage, ceremony, was something we had to hash out. One, because I didn't think – as a Two-Spirit person I didn't think I was *able* to do that ceremony, and I kept it all internalized, “No, I can't do that because I'm gay, I'm Two-Spirited, they won't let me do that.” But then I actually hashed it out with my Elders in the sweat lodge, in the tipi, and they said “Of course you would be included. Why wouldn't you be?” But for a very long time we weren't, and that was due to colonialism, hey? So just now, recently, talking this out and being with other people is expanding our world again and we're getting back to where we needed to be in the first place. The cultures that we had lost thousands of years ago are coming back to us.

Laura's belief in sharing and circulating information for the benefit of her community translates not just to her role as an outreach worker, but into her preferred mode of media engagement:

I will try to relate it back to my community ... I know my First Nations people are very visual so I will read something or watch something and try to transform it into something that they can relate to. ... The good information, I bring that back. It's not mine to keep; it's mine to share. And that's technically how First Nations people functioned and worked. We didn't *hoard* information; we shared it so that we can all be healthy and well-rounded people.

This drive to end silence through the sharing rather than the accumulation of knowledge is a distinctly anti-colonialist stance, in marked contrast to the kind of fandom I have previously discussed – that is, a mode of fandom based on the production and exchange of commodified affects and the accrual of the subcultural power such affective capital provides. Furthermore, Laura's involvement in expanding the possibilities of her community through sharing and connection serves as an actualization of the desire for authenticity expressed by the other participants. While offering an extended analysis of Laura's perspectives on fandom and community extends the scope of this project, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge this contrast, as I believe that if one wishes to begin considering approaches to the construction of media-based lesbian counterpublics that better resist white hegemony, an approach like Laura's, which disavows monopolies of knowledge in the name of cultivating a generous learning spirit (Battiste 2013), would make for an important first step.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The intent of this research was to explore how queer women and female-aligned individuals might use popular culture and the affordances provided by new media to construct counterpublic communities in service of their respective romantic and sexual identities. My focus on queer women and female-aligned identities was motivated by my belief that more broadly-defined research often obscures the unique experiences that lie at the intersections of homonegativity and misogyny. My hope was that the research process might illuminate overarching themes in the narratives to which participants expressed the strongest attachment and in the modes of engagement toward which participants expressed the strongest inclination. These themes might then serve as the foundation for a unifying theory of narrative patterns and character archetypes which most resonate with queer audiences who identify as lesbian, thereby providing something of a template for the cultivation of future mainstream lesbian representations. As expected, queer women often approached mainstream heteronormative texts from a negotiated or oppositional audience position, indicating a desire to participate in mainstream cultural movements while simultaneously being resistant to mainstream depictions of lesbian sexualities. However, while new media may facilitate audience engagement by enabling the broad discussion and exchange of what I have been referring to as alternative readings, allowing for the construction of lesbian counterpublics within the digital sphere, they are not free of hegemonic capitalist influences.

### **Summary of Findings**

Following the interview process, I grouped the data into three unifying categories. The first, *Narratives Claimed by Participants*, addressed what overarching themes could be identified within narratives named by participants as queer. Rather than particular genres, tropes, or narrative models, participants expressed the strongest attachment to narratives in which queer identities were expressly articulated and normalized, allowing for a focus on the humanity of the characters rather than treating their queer identities as somehow setting them apart from their heterosexual counterparts. These conditions produced a sense of authenticity in the characters with the widest scope of possibilities, which, in turn, allowed participants to better relate to them and their storylines. This is in contrast to narratives in which queer characters were either limited to subtext/implication (a practice referred to as queerbaiting) or objectified, either as objects of

sexual desire or as tokenistic symbols of diversity. In instances wherein queer characters *were* perceived as limited in their authenticities, participants compensated through the use of aberrant decoding, using codes developed from their own marginalized standpoints, as discussed in the second unifying theme, *Practices of Alternative Reading*. The final unifying theme, *Alternative Economies*, addressed the role played by new media in queer female textual engagements; namely, how new media have allowed for the emergence of digital communities based around shared interests in particular media texts.

Initially, I proposed that digital fan communities might constitute a form of queer counterpublic, mobilizing shared imaginary spaces in which queer individuals might develop and refine their respective interpretive codes around specific texts. However, as these imaginary spaces form in part around the *development* of such codes, the novelty of these codes and the affects generated begin to acquire value. Those best positioned to create and circulate new interpretive codes consequently acquire the power necessary to direct the discourses which shape their communities, yet as they continue to accrue social capital and become increasingly invested in securing their position in the fandom hierarchy, the affective economy becomes harder to sustain as novelty begins to be seen as disruptive to the status quo. Thus, while fandom *does* represent a site of possibility in which queer individuals can play, explore, and reclaim aesthetics which have been appropriated by mainstream cultural producers, it lacks the radical potential needed to present a meaningful antithesis to capitalism.

### **Strengths of the Study**

I believe there were a number of strengths to this research. Firstly, more broadly-oriented research often obscures the unique experiences that lie at the intersections of homonegativity and misogyny. It is important for research to provide young women and women-aligned individuals space to articulate their experiences and perspectives so that they are not rendered invisible by research which purports to offer them a voice. I believe that my grounded qualitative approach, which emphasized participant-centered testimony and analysis, allowed for the creation of such a space. I further believe that participants found the experience just as meaningful as I did, as evidenced by several participants following up our interview sessions with thank you emails. While it is unknown if the research aided participants in gaining any further insight into their own experiences, they nonetheless all remarked that they had found the research to be enjoyable and

appreciated having been given the opportunity to discuss their opinions with someone who believed their opinions carried value.

In terms of the quality of the research itself, my choice to use semi-structured interviews allowed me to obtain several thorough accounts of highly-personalized data, thereby permitting the generation of more meaningful insights. The richness of the data was, in part, due to the co-constructive nature of the open interview model, as I was able to probe for further information and enable the participant to ask for explanations without sacrificing the integrity of the research. This contributed to greater clarity and resulted in more complete information. Interviews also enabled both myself and the participants to introduce significant changes to the interview process on an as-needed basis, such as diverging from the initial guidelines to follow up on unexpected responses. This flexibility allowed for thicker data than can be obtained through other methods, as the scope of the participant's responses and my own analysis wasn't as limited as they might have been with a questionnaire or survey. This flexibility was complemented by my choice of methodology, as constructivist grounded theory encourages adaptability and for the researcher to revise and refine their procedure as they go along.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A significant limitation of this study is that, while I am pleased with the heterogeneity of my sample, it should in no way be construed as fully representing the diversity of Saskatoon's lesbian community. This is, in part, due to the sample's small size, but it is also due to the fact that many of the participants were students at the University of Saskatchewan, likely responding to the notices on the university's electronic bulletin board, which was one of my more successful methods of recruitment. The educational opportunities provided to young women and female-aligned individuals attending university may affect their perspectives on matters such as privilege and representation, meaning my findings may not extend to those without the means to examine these issues in-depth. These limitations should be kept in mind when reviewing the results of this research. However, my objective when conducting this research was never to generalize to larger populations; rather, it was to explore possible avenues for further research, which I believe this relatively diverse sample has allowed me to do.

A secondary limitation of this study is that, while participants generally expressed a willingness to discuss their experiences with me, many also appeared to be shy or embarrassed,

frequently necessitating the use of probing questions to promote the flow of conversation. This introduced a unique and unforeseen problem: in my attempts to make participants feel more comfortable through informality and the use of probing questions, I seem to have given the impression that I was in possession of a degree of insider knowledge – for example, familiarity with specialized fan vocabulary – and, as a result, participants did not always verbalize their experiences to an extent which might have been desirable, instead relying on slang often used by those “in the know” to convey particular behaviours and emotions. This was how the term “headcanon” was first introduced to this research. Although I attempted to ask for clarification in these circumstances, not wanting to conduct my analysis on the basis of assumptions I was making, it is true that I am in possession of a certain amount of insider knowledge (I myself am a lesbian and a member of various fan communities) and, thus, may not always have been as conscious of these moments of ambiguity of interpretation as would have been ideal.

Finally, the limitation I would consider to be the most significant to this study was the institutionally imposed requirement that I should not meet with participants in person without an escort, a position that my supervisor and I dubbed the “collaborative safety monitor.” The reason for this requirement involved concerns expressed by the ethics board who approved this study. They feared that the researcher might be putting themselves at risk by agreeing to meet with participants unknown to them for interviews regarding sensitive subject matter. Although I understood the rationale for this requirement and willingly agreed to it, I found that synchronizing the schedules of up to three individuals at a time (myself, the participant, and the safety monitor) was more difficult than anticipated. This requirement unfortunately proved obstructive to the research process, as I was not in possession of the resources necessary to formally hire a safety monitor who might be able to more regularly dedicate themselves to this position. I believe that, had this requirement not been in place, I would have been able to interview a larger and more diverse sample overall and expedited the research process as a whole.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

I maintain that research centred around queer female relationships with media is significant due to the ever-shifting attitudes and diverse laws regarding sexual orientation and gender identities. In addition to functioning as a socializing agent for queer youth, as discussed in my literature review, media informs much of the public discourse on both, hence the importance

of accurate representation and accessible content. Furthermore, this research argues for the existence of alternative affective economies that exist within fandom spaces, thereby affirming the value of minoritized critical perspectives on mainstream cultural norms. However, this study was only ever intended to provide the foundation for future research and should in no way be considered universal or definitive.

I would strongly recommend that future research in this area pursue more cohesive specialized samples to further illuminate the unique relationships minoritized individuals can develop with media and each other in their search for “authenticity,” or potentials for actualization. While this includes research focused on even more diverse genders and sexualities, such as research focused exclusively on the experiences of transgender lesbians, so as not to carelessly erase the unique oppressions experienced by women who have transitioned, I believe it should further extend to matters of race and class. Of particular importance in Canada is research on Indigenous sexualities and how cultural attitudes, colonization, and the effects of racism and discrimination might influence how Indigenous women view their own queer sexualities. Sabine Lang’s writings on Indigenous gender variability and Two-Spirit lesbians (2016) and studies of Indigenous women’s unique challenges and subsequent resilience (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, and Bhuyan, 2006; Elm, Lewis, Walters, and Self, 2016), leap to mind as important critical resources in developing deeper engagements with and understandings of the decolonizing potentials of Indigenous forms of sexual and gender expression. While four of the women interviewed in this study were women of colour, only one identified as Indigenous, and time constraints meant that, ultimately, I could not investigate matters of race as deeply as I might have liked. If I were to ever revisit this research, I would like to make a point, not only of welcoming Indigenous voices, but prioritizing them.

I would similarly like to pay more attention to matters of class. When this research was first conceived, I did not anticipate affective economies proving to be so significant, as my understanding of the relationship between fandom and capitalism was limited to my critique of Jenkins’ “textual poaching.” Now that I am aware of how deeply entrenched capitalism *is* in fan behaviour, I believe my research would benefit from a more robust Marxist analysis that takes into account participants’ respective economic positions and how class might influence one’s relationships with media, as discussed under *Limitations of the Study*.

## Final Remarks

In the beginning, my hope was that this project would both highlight the need for further research and inspire mainstream content creators to consider the needs of the marginalized communities they are now more frequently attempting to represent. I desired this so that in the future, queer youth need not feel so alienated by what they see of themselves reflected in the world around them. While I believe my project has successfully highlighted the need for further research and may well inspire mainstream creators in the way I had hoped, I have concluded that fandom lacks the radical potential that I initially anticipated, restricted as it is by entrenched capitalist ideologies that so often make transformative fan labour unsustainable. Thus, I do not believe it is responsible to pin my hopes on targeted consumption, regardless of the kind of content being consumed.

Instead, I would encourage queer creators to continue their creating, without solely restricting themselves to work which is transformative. If what queer women desire is a sense of authenticity, of possibility – in other words, to know they have a future – then I believe there is no better way to spread that message than to share one’s own authentic art, thereby sharing glimpses of other queer women alive in the world who are, themselves, living as fully as they can, in pursuit of more livable futures. I have acknowledged how a universalizing approach in the name of solidarity can obscure differences between and among people. Going forward, it remains necessary to continue to remove the masks we are encouraged to wear around one another so that we may not only acknowledge, but *embrace* our differences, bearing witness to the fullness and the richness of our truest, most authentic selves in community, so that we are not as limited by dominant discourses in our pursuit of possibility.



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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT POSTER

**Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies  
University of Saskatchewan**



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH IN LESBIAN NARRATIVES**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of lesbian narratives.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to talk about your favourite lesbian characters and stories (whether they're 'officially' lesbian or not) and tell us what - in your opinion - *makes* them lesbian for you.

Your participation would involve a single interview which would last approximately 1-2 hours. Please be informed that this interview will involve discussing your gender and sexuality.

You will also have the option of participating in a follow-up interview which would involve us discussing a relevant media text of your choice.

This study is open to all cis and trans women, as well as all female-aligned or unaligned non-binary folk, who love women. This is whether you identify as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or something else altogether.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact Shaylyn White at:

**[lesbiannarratives@outlook.com](mailto:lesbiannarratives@outlook.com)**

**This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.**





## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE 1

### On the Respondent

- How would you describe your sexuality?
- How would you describe your gender?
- When and why would you say you first started thinking of these aspects of your identity in relation to the media you use?
- Are there any other aspects of your identity that you feel are relevant to a discussion about your relationship with media?

### On Queer Narratives

- Are there any fictional/nonfictional stories or popular characters you'd consider formative for your current identity?
- Tell me about a queer story that's important to you. This story can be a book, movie, video game, historical event, etc.
  - Why is this story important to you?
  - Why would you call this story queer?
  - Are you aware of other people who would call this story queer? Please explain.
  - Are you aware of other people who would *not* call this story queer? Please explain.
- Tell me about a queer character or public figure who's important to you. They can be fictional, historical, a pop culture persona, etc.
  - Why is this character/public figure important to you?
  - Why would you call this character/public figure queer?
  - Are you aware of other people who call this character/public figure queer?
- Have you ever interpreted a story or a character as queer without them "officially" being queer?
  - (If yes) Why did they read as queer to you?
  - Are you aware of other people who read this story/character as queer? Are you aware of other people who would not? Please explain.
- Would you say you gravitate more towards queer-produced queer texts or mainstream texts? Why?

### On Media Engagement

- Please describe how you typically engage with media you care about (through consumption, transformative work, etc.).
  - Is this something you do alone/private or is this something you do with friends? Please explain.
- Do you feel there's a difference between engaging with media privately versus engaging with it communally? How so?
  - Does the involvement of others influence how you participate? If so, how?

- Do you feel that the involvement/lack of involvement of your peers has ever influenced the way you “read” a media text? If so, how?
- Do you locate yourself within a fan community? In other words, are you part of a “fandom”?
  - (if yes) How do you locate yourself in this community? In other words, how do you participate in fandom?
  - (if no) Are there particular reasons why fan culture does or does not appeal to you?
- Would you say you primarily produce or consume fan-created content?
- What do you see as the benefits of participation in a fan community? Are there drawbacks?

### **Final Thoughts**

- Is there anything you’d like to discuss that was not brought up previously?
- Do you have any final comments?

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE 2

Note: Depending on the text selected by the participant, new conversation prompts may emerge.

- What elements of this text do you feel have been the most valuable to the formation of your queer identity?
- How does your reading of this text vary from what you imagine mainstream understandings to be?
- Have you ever felt compelled to defend your queer reading of the text?
  - (if yes) How did you do so?
  - (if no) Why not?
- What do you feel are the strengths of this medium as a vehicle for this particular text? What do you feel are its limitations?
- Can you imagine situations in which other individuals/groups might find this particular media item more or less appealing?
- In what social context did you first engage with this text?
- Has your perspective on this text shifted over time?
  - (if yes) How?
  - (if no) Why do you think that is?

## APPENDIX D: GUIDE TO PARTICIPANT-NAMED RESOURCES

***Blue is the Warmest Colour:*** A 2013 French romance film directed by Abdellatif Kechiche that chronicles the relationship between two young women, a high school student and a painter.

***Disgaea:*** A series of Japanese tactical role-playing video games by Nippon Ichi that typically cast the player in the role of a cynical antihero battling for power in the Netherworld.

***Doki Doki Literature Club!*** A 2017 American visual novel by Team Salvato that begins as a lighthearted romance but gradually transitions into metafictional psychological horror.

***Fruits Basket:*** A Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Natsuki Takaya between 1998 and 2006 that tells the story of an orphan girl taken in by a family possessed by the spirits of the Chinese Zodiac. An animated adaptation first aired in 2001 while a reboot began airing in 2019.

***Hamlet:*** A tragedy by Shakespeare that tells the story of the Prince of Denmark and his desire for revenge against his uncle, whom he suspects of killing his father so he could marry his mother.

***Harry Potter:*** A series of British fantasy novels by J.K. Rowling that was published between 1997 and 2007 and tells the story of a young wizard who attends the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

***Little Big Man:*** A 1970 American western film directed by Arthur Penn that tells the story of a white man raised by the Cheyenne nation as a child.

***Little Women:*** An American coming-of-age novel published in two parts in 1868 and 1869 by Louisa May Alcott that tells the story of the four March sisters growing up in Civil War-era Connecticut.

***Lucky Star:*** A Japanese comic strip written and illustrated by Kagami Yoshimizu that has been serialized since 2003 and portrays the everyday lives of four girls attending high school. An animated adaptation aired in 2007.

***Naruto:*** A Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Masashi Kishimoto between 1999 and 2014 that tells the story of a young ninja who is ostracized by his peers and hopes to gain their recognition through becoming the leader of their village. An animated adaptation ran from 2002-2017.

***Orange is the New Black:*** An American comedy-drama series created for Netflix that aired from 2013 to 2019 and adapts Piper Kerman's memoir of the same name about her experiences in a women's prison.

***Queer Eye: We're in Japan!*** A 2019 spinoff of the Netflix reboot of the reality series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. This spinoff features a group known as the "Fab 5" going to Japan to revitalize the lives of various people there.

***Sesame Street:*** A long-running American educational children's series that first aired in 1969 and features a combination of live-action skits and puppetry.

***She-Ra and the Princesses of Power:*** An American animated Netflix series developed by Noelle Stevenson that premiered in 2018 and reboots the 1985 Filmation series *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. *She-Ra* tells the story of a young girl who receives a magic sword that allows her to transform into the titular She-Ra and fight evil.

***The Handmaiden:*** A 2016 South Korean film directed by Park Chan-wook that adapts the Sarah Waters novel *Fingersmith*. The film tells the story of a con artist who schemes to steal an heiress' inheritance, only for the girl hired to pose as her maid to fall in love with her.

***The Magnus Archives:*** A horror fiction anthology podcast produced by Rusty Quill that premiered in 2016 and follows the head of a fictional institute for research into the paranormal.

***Victorious:*** An American teen sitcom created by Dan Schneider that aired between 2010 and 2013 and tells the story of an aspiring teenage singer who attends a performing arts high school.

***Voltron: Legendary Defender:*** An American animated Netflix series that aired between 2016 and 2018 and reboots the *Voltron* franchise. *Voltron* tells the story of a group of space pilots who become involved in an intergalactic war when they discover their ability to pilot five robots who can together form the robot warrior Voltron.

***Welcome to Night Vale:*** A surrealist comedy-horror podcast created by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor that premiered in 2012 and takes the format of a local radio show in a small town "where every conspiracy theory is true" ("Starter's Guide").

***Wonder Woman:*** A 2017 American superhero film that tells the story of the Amazon princess Diana and her attempts to stop World War I.

***Yes or No:*** A 2010 Thai romantic comedy-drama film directed by Sarasawadee Wongsompetch that tells the story of a university student from a conservative family who falls in love with her "tom" (butch) roommate.

## APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM 1



### *Participant Consent Form*

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**Project Title:** Constructing Lesbian Narratives: Exploring Lesbian-Identified Resources for Building Counterpublic Identities and Communities Using Mainstream Media – Phase 1

**Researcher:** Shaylyn White, Graduate Student, Women's and Gender Studies, University of Saskatchewan, [lesbiannarratives@outlook.com](mailto:lesbiannarratives@outlook.com)

**Supervisor:** Marie Lovrod, Women's and Gender Studies, (306) 966-7538, [marie.lovrod@usask.ca](mailto:marie.lovrod@usask.ca)

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- To examine the role of popular culture and digital media in the formation of the contemporary queer female identity
- To identify patterns in queer readings of media texts
- To articulate what queer women believe makes a narrative “lesbian”

**Procedures**

- Shaylyn White will conduct an interview with the participant (date and location TBD)  
The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours of the participant's time
- The interview will involve discussion of the participant's gender and sexuality
- The participant will not be required to answer any questions they are uncomfortable with
- The interviewer will digitally record the interview and produce a transcript
- The participant may request that the recording device be turned off at any time without giving a reason
- The participant will be sent the transcript for review and be given the opportunity to add, alter, or delete information as they see fit, if desired
- The participant will have a deadline of ten days upon receipt of the transcript to request any such alterations, after which point changes may no longer be possible
- The transcript of the interview will be analyzed by Shaylyn White in consultation with Marie Lovrod
- The results of this analysis will be used for the writing of a thesis to be completed in Fall 2019 which may then serve as the basis of a future academic article

- The participant may be asked to participate in a second phase of the research which will involve collaborative analysis of a text of their choice. Participation in this second phase is entirely voluntarily and will have a separate set of procedures outlined in a separate consent form

Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

### **Potential Risks:**

- Should it become known that a participant was taking part in this study, they may face negative social repercussions due to societal stigma against queer individuals. The likelihood of this occurring is small due to the steps the researcher will undertake to maintain confidentiality.
- Because the interview questions will be of a personal nature and will potentially relate to sensitive topics, it is possible that they will cause the participant emotional or psychological distress. The likelihood of this occurring is moderate will be addressed in a debriefing following the interview.
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:**
- Participation in this research will be entirely voluntary and the participant will be able to withdraw at any time.
- The researcher will allow the participant to add, alter, or delete information in their transcript prior to final data analysis. This will allow the participant to remain in control of any information which is to be made public, in anonymous formats.
- A debriefing will take place following the interview in which mental health and community resources will be made available to the participants should the participant request or require it (see “Support Services” below)
- Should the participant appear to be in severe distress, the researcher will terminate the interview and delete the data gathered.

### **Confidentiality:**

- Any variation on the conditions stated in this section will only occur with your explicit approval.
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to Shaylyn White and Marie Lovrod.
- Any content from the interview - including direct quotations - that are to be made public through either the presentation of the researcher’s thesis or the publication of an academic article will be anonymized so that the participant cannot be identified.
- Should any academic article be produced, you will be notified.

### **Storage of Data:**

- The data will be stored electronically on a password-protected laptop and backed-up on a password-protected USB to be kept in a locked drawer. When the data no longer required, the data will be deleted beyond recovery from both the laptop and the USB.
- Signed consent forms will be stored separately from the study data.
- The final report will be stored electronically on a password-protected laptop. Physical copies will be made available to the participants and submitted to the

research supervisors for evaluation. Physical copies will not be distributed otherwise.

- Following the completion of the researcher's thesis, data will be preserved in long-term storage for five years minimum as per University of Saskatchewan guidelines under the supervision of Marie Lovrod.

### **Right to Withdraw**

- Your participation is voluntary and you may answer only those questions with which you are comfortable. You may inform the researcher of your wish to withdraw from the research project for any reason without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on how you will be treated by the researcher.
- Should you wish to withdraw, your data will be removed from the research project and destroyed if possible. After data pooling and analysis, it may no longer be possible to identify and withdraw your data.

### **Follow up:**

- To obtain results from the study, please contact Shaylyn White, as indicated above.
- If an academic article is produced, you will be notified by Shaylyn White and given the opportunity to review the article.

### **Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

### **Support Services:**

OUTSaskatoon

Address: Top Floor – 320 21<sup>st</sup> Street West, Saskatoon SK, S7M 4E6

Phone: 306-665-1224

Toll Free: 1-800-358-1833

Email: [hello@outsaskatoon.ca](mailto:hello@outsaskatoon.ca)

Web: [outsaskatoon.ca](http://outsaskatoon.ca)

USSU Pride Centre (for University of Saskatchewan students only)

Address: Room 104, Memorial Union Building, University of Saskatchewan

Mailing Address: Room 110 – Place Riel Student Centre, #1 Campus Drive, Saskatoon SK, S7N 5A3

Phone: 306-966-6615

Email: [pride.centre@ussu.ca](mailto:pride.centre@ussu.ca)



**Consent**

This form may be signed physically or electronically. If signing the form physically, please do so in blue or black ink. If signing the form electronically, please draw or insert a picture of your signature.

It is recommended that electronic signatures are created using the Fill & Sign tool in the free Adobe Acrobat Reader. However, please note that this tool is only recommended for signature creation and will not be used as a means of sending or receiving documentation. To protect participant confidentiality, this study will only be sending and receiving documentation through the designated study email listed in the contact information at the top of page 1. Adobe Creative Cloud storage services will not be used.

After this form has been signed by the participant, it should be given or forwarded to the researcher for filing along with other ethics documents obtained for this study. The participant should keep a copy of this consent form for their records.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

## APPENDIX F: CONSENT FORM 2



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
College of  
Arts and Science  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
ARTSANDSCIENCE.USASK.CA



Women's and Gender Studies  
9 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 Canada  
306-966-7893  
wgst.program@usask.ca

### *Participant Consent Form*

---

**Project Title:** Constructing Lesbian Narratives: Exploring Lesbian-Identified Resources for Building Counterpublic Identities and Communities Using Mainstream Media – Phase 2

**Researcher:** Shaylyn White, Graduate Student, Women's and Gender Studies, University of Saskatchewan, [lesbiannarratives@outlook.com](mailto:lesbiannarratives@outlook.com)

**Supervisor:** Marie Lovrod, Women's and Gender Studies, (306) 966-7538, [marie.lovrod@usask.ca](mailto:marie.lovrod@usask.ca)

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- To examine the role of popular culture and digital media in the formation of the contemporary queer female identity
- To identify patterns in queer readings of media texts
- To articulate what queer women believe makes a narrative “lesbian”

**Procedures**

- Shaylyn White will ask the participant to name a media text they consider important to their queer identity. This text will then be read, watched, played, etc. by Shaylyn White to prepare for an informed discussion
- The participant will be invited to discuss the text with Shaylyn White in a casual context, date and location TBD in consultation with the participant
- The conversation will involve discussion of the participant's gender and sexuality
- The participant will only be required to take part in the discussion to the extent they are comfortable with
- The interviewer will digitally record the discussion and produce a transcript
- The participant may request that the recording device be turned off at any time without giving a reason
- The participant will be sent the transcript for review and be given the opportunity to add, alter, or delete information as they see fit, if desired
- The participant will have a deadline of ten days upon receipt of the transcript to request any such changes, after which point changes may no longer be possible

- The transcript of this discussion will be analyzed by Shaylyn White in consultation with Marie Lovrod
- The results of this analysis will be used for the writing of a thesis to be completed in Fall 2019 which may then serve as the basis of a future academic article

Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

### **Potential Risks:**

- Should it become known that a participant was taking part in this study, they may face negative social repercussions due to societal stigma against queer individuals. The likelihood of this occurring is small due to the steps the researcher will undertake to maintain confidentiality.
- Because the interview questions will be of a personal nature and will potentially relate to sensitive topics, it is possible that they will cause the participant emotional or psychological distress. The likelihood of this occurring is moderate will be addressed in a debriefing following the interview.
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:**
- Participation in this research will be entirely voluntary and the participant will be able to withdraw at any time.
- The researcher will allow the participant to add, alter, or delete information in their transcript prior to final data analysis. This will allow the participant to remain in control of any information which is to be made public, in anonymous formats.
- A debriefing will take place following the interview in which mental health and community resources will be made available to the participants should the participant request or require it (see “Support Services” below)
- Should the participant appear to be in severe distress, the researcher will terminate the interview and delete the data gathered.

### **Confidentiality:**

- Any variation on the conditions stated in this section will only occur with your explicit approval.
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to Shaylyn White and Marie Lovrod.
- Any content from the interview - including direct quotations - that are to be made public through either the presentation of the researcher’s thesis or the publication of an academic article will be anonymized so that the participant cannot be identified.
- Should any academic article be produced, you will be notified.

### **Storage of Data:**

- The data will be stored electronically on a password-protected laptop and backed-up on a password-protected USB to be kept in a locked drawer. When the data no longer required, the data will be deleted beyond recovery from both the laptop and the USB.
- Signed consent forms will be stored separately from the study data.
- The final report will be stored electronically on a password-protected laptop. Physical copies will be made available to the participants and submitted to the

research supervisors for evaluation. Physical copies will not be distributed otherwise.

- Following the completion of the researcher's thesis, data will be preserved in long-term storage for five years minimum as per University of Saskatchewan guidelines under the supervision of Marie Lovrod.

### **Right to Withdraw**

- Your participation is voluntary and you may answer only those questions with which you are comfortable. You may inform the researcher of your wish to withdraw from the research project for any reason without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on how you will be treated by the researcher.
- Should you wish to withdraw, your data will be removed from the research project and destroyed if possible. After data pooling and analysis, it may no longer be possible to identify and withdraw your data.

### **Follow up:**

- To obtain results from the study, please contact Shaylyn White, as indicated above.
- If an academic article is produced, you will be notified by Shaylyn White and given the opportunity to review the article.

### **Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

### **Support Services:**

OUTSaskatoon

Address: Top Floor – 320 21<sup>st</sup> Street West, Saskatoon SK, S7M 4E6

Phone: 306-665-1224

Toll Free: 1-800-358-1833

Email: [hello@outsaskatoon.ca](mailto:hello@outsaskatoon.ca)

Web: [outsaskatoon.ca](http://outsaskatoon.ca)

USSU Pride Centre (for University of Saskatchewan students only)

Address: Room 104, Memorial Union Building, University of Saskatchewan

Mailing Address: Room 110 – Place Riel Student Centre, #1 Campus Drive, Saskatoon SK, S7N 5A3

Phone: 306-966-6615

Email: [pride.centre@ussu.ca](mailto:pride.centre@ussu.ca)

**Consent**

This form may be signed physically or electronically. If signing the form physically, please do so in blue or black ink. If signing the form electronically, please draw or insert a picture of your signature.

It is recommended that electronic signatures are created using the Fill & Sign tool in the free Adobe Acrobat Reader. However, please note that this tool is only recommended for signature creation and will not be used as a means of sending or receiving documentation. To protect participant confidentiality, this study will only be sending and receiving documentation through the designated study email listed in the contact information at the top of page 1. Adobe Creative Cloud storage services will not be used.

After this form has been signed by the participant, it should be given or forwarded to the researcher for filing along with other ethics documents obtained for this study. The participant should keep a copy of this consent form for their records.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

## APPENDIX G: SAFETY MONITOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT



### COLLABORATIVE SAFETY MONITOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Constructing Lesbian Narratives:  
Exploring Lesbian-Identified Resources  
for Building Counterpublic Identities and Communities  
Using Mainstream Media

[Beh ID 1081]

**Please read through the entirety of this form carefully before signing.**

**Electronic signatures are not valid for this form.** After completing the required fields, please print and sign this form in blue or black ink. After this form has been signed by the Collaborative Safety Monitor, it should be given to the Principal Investigator of the research study for filing with other ethics documents obtained for this study.

The Collaborative Safety Monitor should keep a copy of the *Collaborative Safety Monitor Confidentiality Agreement* for their records.

Confidentiality is the treatment and maintenance of information that an individual has disclosed in a relationship of trust and with the expectation that it will not be divulged to others in ways that are inconsistent with the understanding of the original disclosure (the consent form), without permission.

As a Collaborative Safety Monitor you will not be privy to the content of interviews for which you provide an immediate safety resources, but owing to your presence at the interview site, will have access to limited research information (e.g. visual contact with study participants, etc.) which constitutes confidential information, covered by the ethics agreements obtained for this study. Many participants choose to participate in sensitive research only because Principal Investigators have assured participants that every effort will be made to maintain their confidentiality. That is why it is of the utmost importance to maintain full confidentiality when conducting your duties as a safety monitor during this research study. *Below is a list of expectations you will be required to adhere to as a safety monitor. Please carefully review these expectations before signing this form.*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to provide safety support for this study. I agree that I will:

1. Keep all research information confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format with anyone other than Dr. Marie Lovrod and Shaylyn White, the Principal Investigators on this study;

2. Acknowledge that termination or expiry of my involvement with the research shall not affect the obligations arising under this agreement with respect to research information disclosed prior to termination or expiry.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have reviewed, understand, and agree to adhere to the expectations for a Safety Monitor described above. I agree to maintain confidentiality while performing my duties as a Safety Monitor and recognize that failure to comply with these expectations may result in termination of this agreement and further academic disciplinary action.

---

Signature of Collaborative Safety Monitor

---

Date

---

Signature of Graduate Student Researcher

---

Date