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Queer

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Queer media is an emergent category acknowledging that media forms, from film and television to an ever expanding digital sphere, are no longer just "playing to Peoria" (and the many Peorias since established) as the standard of demographic normalcy and desirability. The early 2000s saw the emergence of LGBTQ-focused programming on cable networks like Logo, and gave rise to Bravo as the unofficial home for queer programming ever since it turned queer eyes to straight guys. More recently, queer methods for storytelling have come to prominence on streaming platforms like Amazon and Netflix (which launched queer shows like *Transparent*), and social media sites like YouTube and Instagram, which provide platforms for queer and transgender people to auto-document their lives, struggles, and transitions. In short, queer niches have sprouted up across the media landscape since the beginning of the new millennium, even as LGBTQ characters have become more prevalent on prime-time network programming—ABC's sitcom *Modern Family* the most frequently cited among them.

Queer media also function as a historical index: as a phrase that encompasses, in shorthand, the medial transformations and shifts that afford such proximity with the "queer," and the cultural and conceptual changes queer life, culture, and theory have inaugurated in the United States and beyond (Villarejo 2014). In other words, we have become more attentive to the ways in which media themselves have been transformed at various historical moments by the advances of, and irruptions caused by, LGBTQ civil rights movements and calls for political and cultural representation. Scripted television "after *Ellen*," DeGeneres's herstorical coming out in "The Puppy Episode" in 1997, and the proliferation of queer participation on reality television, with its roots in PBS's 1973 series *An American Family*, are owed in many respects to the historical agitations and transformations that precipitated these moments of visibility (Villarejo 2014, 92).

"Queer media" also names a set of practices and methods for interpreting media that may or may *not* make themselves available to queer interpretation, queer worlds, and queer people—as innovators in the field of feminist, LGBTQ media studies have explored for over two decades (Doty 1993; Joyrich 1996; Modleski 2007; Rich 2013; White 1999). With a contemporary media landscape relatively rich in queer representation—from *Orange Is the New Black* to *I Am Cait* to "Same Love," the rapper Macklemore's top-forty hit advocating for gay marriage, to mainstream movies depicting lesbian marriage between All-American sweethearts (*Jenny's Wedding*, 2015)—it would seem that queer viewers are no longer bereft of the opportunity to see ourselves on screens and devices large, small, fixed, and portable.

How and why, then, do arguments about queer visibility still run the table? For example, why are we obsessed with the lack of butch lesbians in film and TV (one of Jack Halberstam's recurrent concerns on his collaborative scholarly blog, *Bully Bloggers*), at the same time we capitulate to the latest BuzzFeed hype about the openly queer, masculine of center celesbian DJ, supermodel, and actress Ruby Rose, not to mention the many would-be Ruby Roses clamoring to reboot "lesbian chic" on social media platforms like Instagram? Why amid such apparent abundance, are we still left feeling so empty? Furthermore, why in this economy

of plentitude are we still struggling to describe what is queer about media, and how media themselves might be queer? These definitional problems arise in part because the category of "queer" and what exactly it indexes have always been up for debate in the academy and beyond. At times "queer" has come to mean a particular set of sexual practices, positions, and proclivities. In the past fifteen years or so, scholars have vigorously debated whether or not queer constitutes *any* form of antinormativity. Meanwhile, some of the field's fundamental questions continue to abide: Is queer an identity? An orientation? A method? A practice of reading, seeing, or hearing?

Aren't-we-GLAAD approaches to quantifying queer visibility—that is, measuring with exactness how many gay characters, shows, and actors are on TV or in films, and whether or not these portrayals are positive or negative—have created their own set of limitations around our encounters with *all* forms of media, not just explicitly queer representations with identifiable queer bodies, characters and "acts." Like the Dickensian Mr. Gradgrind, the headmaster in *Hard Times* obsessed with numbers and their Malthusian applicability to a profit-driven "greater good," queer media observers are inevitably derailed by counting how many LGBTQ shows are watched by larger audiences, and measuring their "impact" in ways that equate profit and advertiser approval with political progress. As an alternative to these metrics of quantification, and in the effort to bring back some of the vicissitudes the murky designation of "queerness" affords, we might rediscover queer media, past and present, as sites of fantasy, play, and projection.

In other words, we are so fixated on how *many*, how *often*, and how *affirmative* portrayals are that we have begun to lose sight and sound of the textures, sensations, and idiosyncrasies that fuel the pleasure of queer spectatorship and participation (Belcher 2014; Moore 2013; Rhee and Phillips 2015). To invoke Kara Keeling's more expansive medial perspective, we are in a moment during which we have the potential to craft the architecture for a "Queer OS" (operating system). As Keeling writes, "Queer OS names a way of thinking and acting with, about, through, among, and at times even in spite of new media technologies and other phenomena of mediation. It insists upon forging and facilitating uncommon, irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships between and among what currently are perceptible as living beings and the environment in the interest of creating value(s) that facilitate just relations" (2014, 154). I'm interested in Keeling's insistence on the "thinking and acting *with*." Queer media, in other words, is as much about a queer engagement, and sometimes *resistance* to certain processes of representation and mediation in the effort to forge an otherwise, and a "not yet" (to echo the language of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*): a striving for alternate and just relationalities or "different paths to queerness" (2009, 15).

Furthermore, queer is anchored never simply to a set of bodies or practices, but more crucially to a set of methods and *desires*—both political and intellectual—derived from activist genealogies (e.g., the legacy of Queer Nation), the academy (since the institutionalization of queer studies starting in the 1990s), and media forms themselves. As I argued elsewhere, "Though we may have loved, fucked, eaten, sang, sewn, played softball, honked the tuba, ballet danced, taken ecstasy, and flashed jazz hands, queerly in our lifetimes before our respective sojourns in higher education, we talk, write, read, watch publish essays and books, waste our time making GIFs about, and sit in harshly lit MLA ballrooms to mull over the queer we learned in school" (Tongson 2014, 118). Extending my claims about the affinities, and the formal, as well as everyday pedagogies constituting

"queerness," to media engagement, I would also like to imagine that queer spectatorship—particularly televisuality and the proliferating forms of "home-viewing" in which we participate—is also born of another kind of sensibility: a "latchkey" sensibility that we often equate with the voracious overconsumption of media that forges our queer sensibilities. I would argue, for example, that the figure we have come to know as the "latchkey kid" is the linchpin to illuminating queer media and queer relationships to media: she is the figure left to her own devices who forges improper identifications, and—to invoke Muñoz's work once more—dangerous disidentifications (1999) with media content, appropriate or inappropriate. Through the historical, metaphorical figure of the latchkey kid, we can trace a particular kind of queer relationship to media born of excess and dereliction, one in which the queer spectators project themselves into worlds beyond the ones that have chosen to ignore them.

Historically, the "latchkey kid" is among the first prototypical consumers (some would say over-consumers) of media, who cannot be imagined as a producer of any kind. Unsupervised, left alone, and either fearful or bored, the youth of suburbia have been called latchkey kids since World War II, when the label was invented to describe children transiently orphaned by work as well as war. In 1944, Henry L. Zucker, secretary of the Emergency Child Care Committee of Cleveland, and an advisory committee member of the Child Welfare League of America, lamented the term's induction into the "social work literature" of the era: "The nomenclature of social work literature has been enriched during the war by such terms as 'latchkey' or 'doorkey' children and 'eight hour orphans.' . . . The house key tied around the neck is the symbol of cold meals, of a child neglected and shorn of the security of a mother's love and affection. These new terms foretell a war-bred generation of problem adolescents-to-be in the 1950s, and of maladjusted parents-to-be in the 1960s" (Zucker 1944, 43).

Even before the concept of a nuclear family cohered in the atomic age after World War II—an age that bore witness to America's storied baby boom, its rapid suburbanization, and the rise of television—social workers were concerned with the dissolution of the family unit, because of the shifting gender roles wrought by war. With more women in the workforce, as men fought overseas in the European and Pacific theaters, children were increasingly left to seek refuge with neighbors or "aged grandparents," or worse, according to social observers, to fend for themselves. Quoting extensively from a female elementary school principal's report on her school's "war casualties," Zucker argued that the excessive consumption of media had a deleterious effect upon a child's unsupervised time:

> Edward, a bright child but extremely nervous, could not sit still or remain in his seat long enough to do his work. Both parents were working, both were extremely tired and nervous. . . . One Monday, things became so extremely bad in the classroom that the teacher asked Edward what he had done. Well, the mother had given him $2.00 to do what he wanted. He left home at ten o'clock, went to a movie at the Hippodrome, then one at the Palace, one at the Mall, then one at the neighborhood theater, arriving home at ten o'clock [PM], tired but feeling that he had had a most successful day. (Zucker 1944, 47)

Even before broadcast television became a staple of every middle-class home, and binge watching and #showholes (a recent ad campaign encouraging binge viewing through the Amazon Fire platform) entered popular parlance in the streaming era, Edward, the

insatiable consumer of entertainment, proved how delinquency, truancy, and disrespect for institutions and authority are fostered by "the wrong" relationship to media.

Thus the queer viewer has always, already been something of a latchkey viewer. Our entry points to media are often askew, and require a certain overindulgence and excessiveness. The latchkey queer is the one who, like Jonathan Caouette in his homemade, indie feature *Tarnation* (2003), or performance artist Kalup Linzy in his sumptuous, if low-tech, fannish soap opera performance videos (2002–6), transposes isolate, sometimes lonely queer viewing practices of mainstream programming, from prime-time drama to daytime fare like *Guiding Light*, into the texture of another life, another story, another medium. Caouette turned his latchkey overconsumption of prime-time soaps, documented autoethnographically on video throughout his adolescence, into the content and texture for a feature film later he made as an adult using iMovie. Linzy does similar work with his performance videos, albeit through dramatic reenactments of his and other queers of color's reception of soapy daytime fare. Like latchkey kids who had to fend for themselves and fight for their sustenance, these queer artists reheated what was processed and packaged and turned it into something nourishing. Latchkey queers are the dykes who, like the members of the 1990s punk band Team Dresch, accidentally happened upon Mariel Hemingway and Patrice Donnelly achieving their *Personal Best* (1982) on an endless cycle of regular cable repeats of the sporty film in the afternoon, opening pathways to becoming fantastical new beings à la "Fagetarian and Dyke" on their 1995 album *Personal Best*—an oblique musical homage to the film.

The objects may continue to change. Instead of glistening lady track stars perspiring in slow motion after their athletic exertions, we may now turn to butch lesbian-identified Top Chefs sporting all iterations of the faux hawk while thrusting their "hands up, and utensils down" upon Padma Lakshmi's command. Instead of Harry Hamlin "making love" with both Michael Ontkean *and* Kate Jackson as he did as a confused bisexual man in the film *Making Love* from 1982, we may take a prurient queer pleasure in the overcooked heterodisaster-kink of a cable series like *The Affair* (2015–), or the slow-burning normporn of a show like NBC's *Parenthood* (2010–15), or the adoptive parental homonormporn of *The Fosters* (2013–) (Tongson 2015). Queer media have meant, and continue to mean to me, the sort of titillated, interpellated, yet ultimately ambivalent viewing practices, that re-enliven the reparative, and disidentificatory practices of queer fantasy—the kind of imagining that carries the potential for queer world making. To watch and listen queerly also mean to explore the ambivalent pleasures, and the attraction-repulsion queer viewers experience when watching even the most mainstream, ready-for-prime-time network programming designed for families, modern or not. These moments of queer encounter with and *within* media, with or without actual queer bodies, created the conditions of possibility for—continue to create the possibility for—righteous and radiant queer operating systems, platforms, fantasies, or what we still dare to call "worlds," from yesterday to today; for tomorrow, forever, or perhaps even never, IRL—in real life.