

“Think About the Children”: Agency and the Politics of Childhood Innocence in Queerbaiting

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[Queer people] deserve representation and we deserve entertainment that serves us. Think about the children growing up never seeing that and thinking it's impossible. I was one of them. – *Sherlock* (BBC) fan

Social media has allowed fans to enjoy increased agency in the production and dissemination of textual meaning through fanfiction, fan art and community-building. Fans can unite and “speak back” to media texts and their creators about textual meaning, gaining the attention of industry through activism that both praises and criticizes (Navar-Gill and Stanfill 85). However, even with this increased agency there is still a reinforcement of authorial legitimacy and intentionality in contemporary representational politics that present fans as operating without any agency or power over the interpretation of meaning. The phenomenon of “queerbaiting” provides a prominent example of this centering of authorial intent and evacuation of agency in fandom.

“Queerbaiting” is a pejorative fan-coined term that has emerged recently to refer to the tactic of intentionally hinting at, or touting, queer representation in media to entice LGBTQ¹ viewers and gain their investments, without ever following through. Fans use the term to criticize media producers and performers who purportedly “bait” audiences with the promise of explicit queerness, only to never actualize this queer subtext (Brennan, “Introduction” 105). Within queerbaiting debates, there has been a shift from negotiations of the authentic or ‘real’ story and

¹ Although I use “LGBTQ” to refer to “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer,” I am not uncritical of its usage and acknowledge the problematic attempt to unify people through identity categories.

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Popular Culture Studies Journal
Vol. 9, No. 1, Copyright © 2021

who has access, knowledge and authority over this singular meaning (McDermott, "Contest" 133), to the affective responses to queerbaiting, arguing that the tactic causes representational harm (McDermott, "From Canon to Politics" 118). Further, to criticize queerbaiting and the creators and performers who supposedly practice it intentionally, fans present themselves as stripped of agency and operating from a position of disempowerment. This is achieved partly through a specific conceptualization of childhood innocence referenced in queerbaiting critique. I argue that this focus on childhood innocence, while it may be partly successful in convincing some that certain queerbaiting texts are exploitative and harmful, ultimately forecloses the queer possibilities available in the exercising of agency.

Drawing on twenty-four semi-structured, online interviews with fans, this paper examines the function of agency in contemporary queer fandom through an analysis of queerbaiting and, specifically, the use of childhood innocence in these debates. It analyzes the implications that these affective politics of childhood innocence have for contemporary operations and orientations in queer fandom. The one-on-one interviews with fans recruited on Reddit and Tumblr were conducted online over instant messaging. The age of participants ranged from twenty to fifty-three years old. Sixteen participants identified as cisgender women, three as cisgender men, one as a transgender man, and four as non-binary people. Three participants identified as heterosexual or straight, and the rest identified as either gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual or questioning. Twenty-two of the participants disclosed their ethnic/cultural background as White or Caucasian, with one as Asian/Chinese and one as Italian. The overwhelming whiteness of the responses is clearly a limitation of this study and speaks to the larger erasure of people of color both in fandom studies research and in fandom itself (Pande 1). Conducting the interviews through instant messenger may present the challenge of a lack of vocal, facial, and bodily cues, but it does allow for a level of comfort for the participants that might not be possible otherwise (Kazmer and Xie 257). Further, it provided a level of reach not possible through in-person interviews. Fifteen of the participants were from the United States, four from Australia, two from Italy, two from Brazil and one from Poland. Conducting a qualitative, interview-based, sociological inquiry of queerbaiting is crucial to the study of the phenomenon as it is the thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences of fans that are reproducing the discourse as it plays out in online digital cultures. The voices of fans, therefore, play a significant and important focus of my analysis.

Queerbaiting and the Politics of Childhood Innocence

As the *Sherlock* fan articulates in the epigraph of this paper, queerbaiting criticisms routinely utilize notions of childhood innocence to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting and the importance of positive queer representation. Within this tactic, I observe various discourses surrounding the politics of childhood innocence, power, and victimhood with implications for the function and political saliency of agency in contemporary queer fandom. Many fans involved in queerbaiting debates frequently reference their own childhood or an abstract child, positioning them as innocent and vulnerable to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting and the responsibility, therefore, of media creators to produce positive queer representation.

The use of childhood innocence and the “protection” of children, however, is routinely utilized in wider politics, particularly in opposition to queer and feminist movements. Such use implies that progressive movements harm children. The harm is understood to be enacted by threatening children’s ‘natural’ state of innocence or the naturalized, heteronormative, patriarchal gender order inextricably tied to child rearing. However, rather than opposing this logic of centering children, some progressive movements also insist upon their value for protecting childhood innocence. When feminist or gay rights movements attempt to justify their politics by insisting that they too are keeping children safe, they are often criticized by some queer theorists for re-centering children and childhood innocence. Such a re-centering, critics argue, reinscribes colonial, heteronormative, and patriarchal politics. This criticism has most notably been voiced by Lee Edelman in his foundational text *No Future*. Edelman argues that contemporary politics rely upon a logic of futurity that is inherently intertwined with heterosexuality and what he terms “reproductive futurism” (19). He asserts that any politics that works to affirm a structure or authenticate a social order is conservative insofar as it is oriented in its intentions towards a future in the form of the child. When queers respond to the conservative trope of “child protection” as a pretext for discrimination by insisting that they too value children, marriage and society’s future, Edelman argues that the subversive force of queer sexuality is lost. He asserts that just as queerness can only ever disrupt an identity, not constitute one, queer theory must necessarily be opposed to a politics that aims to affirm reproductive futurity.

However, a politics of the child, or indeed any conception of children is not always already heteronormative in its orientation towards a future as Edelman asserts. Children, Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, do not always “grow up” into

adulthood when adults say it is “time.” Rather, children can be in a state of “delay,” “suspension” and “backward birthing.” Yet it is precisely in these states that Stockton identifies the ways in which the child experiences “sideways growth,” moving just as much laterally as they do vertically. The child becomes a figure not of reproductive futurity in the service of heteronormativity, but of a sideways growth. This opens up a space for queers to find meaning in a growth that seeks alternative orientations to a heterosexual adulthood and future predicated on countering, resisting and delaying “growing up.” It is in this reimagining of growth that I locate space for queers to enjoy agency in determinations of futures.

I argue that within queerbaiting discourse, childhood innocence is used to both demonstrate the harms of negative representation and to position fans as operating without agency, just as children are understood to operate without agency in wider politics. I suggest that the harm that is seen to be caused by queerbaiting is partly conceptualized through discourses of childhood innocence where there is an evacuation of agency from fans, despite potentially enjoying increased levels of agency through social media. Speaking back to creators, creating slash fiction, or connecting over shared loss and disappointment may negate some of the harm felt at what is perceived to be insufficient or exploitative representation; however, the requirement of fans to be positioned as operating without any agency over textual meaning within queerbaiting discourse has supplanted any of this potential agency they may have felt over the text. This lack of agency and power is paralleled with the purported lack of agency of children to illustrate creator intent and, therefore, the exploitation in queerbaiting.

Within queerbaiting debates, the innocence of children is deployed to present young queer people as vulnerable to the harms of heteronormativity and of “negative” or lack of queer representation. Queerbaiting critics see young queer audiences as vulnerable to the harms of queerbaiting due to their apparent lack of power in the affirmation of their queerness in a heteronormative world and over the production or reach of media’s influence. Whilst childhood innocence is often conceptualized in conservative politics to distance children — both politically and epistemologically — from queerness, fans within queerbaiting debates deploy childhood innocence because of a child’s queerness. Innocence is routinely used in criticisms of queerbaiting and wider representational politics as a means to highlight the importance of affirming same-sex desire and gender-non-conformity in children. Critics of queerbaiting draw attention to the queer child, highlighting their innocence and vulnerability whilst simultaneously attempting to redraw the

narratives of growth away from a heterosexual adulthood. With this focus on childhood innocence, agency is removed from any positioning of children (or fans) in discourses of media representation and consumption. Childhood innocence is a lens through which fans attempt to expose the powerlessness of children and the harm, therefore, that is inflicted upon them by queerbaiting.

Knowledge and Vulnerability

Within queerbaiting debates, children are positioned as without knowledge or the ability to imagine a happy, queer adulthood. In their attempt to expose and criticize the harms of queerbaiting, fans present children as especially vulnerable to representational harm due to their lack of knowledge and agency in imagining the possibility of a queer adulthood. Thus, media is seen to grant young viewers the ability to imagine a possible queer adulthood and to affirm their same-sex desire and/or gender non-conformity. As two fans explain:

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

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

The experience of young queer people as vulnerable to having “difficulty with their identity” or “questioning their sexuality” provides the basis for many criticisms of queerbaiting. Fans draw on these images of vulnerable young queer people to criticize what they view as exploitative and damaging media images. Whilst many fans spoke considerably about their own pain, frustration, and anger at queerbaiting,

it was the imagined child that was consistently drawn on to demonstrate queerbaiting's apparent harms.

In the practice of fans looking back at their own childhoods or the imagined, collective experience of queer children, young people were understood to embody notions of naivety, as lacking understanding and knowledge that is gained through experience. One thirty-three-year-old gay fan of *Supernatural* and the MCU franchise wrote that he mostly agreed with the opinions of Tumblr users regarding queerbaiting, however, “[s]ometimes some of the younger fans on Tumblr get a little too enthusiastic and they’ll swear that a ship is canon, or that it’s been hinted left and right and I think that may be a bit of wishful thinking.” The act of wishful thinking here refers to fans believing that a male/male or female/female pairing of characters will become explicitly involved in a romantic or sexual coupling as intended by the creators. By highlighting their age, Hunter implies that younger fans on Tumblr are naïve to the intentions of the writers because of their youthful immaturity or lack of experience.

I observe a similar conceptualizing of youth not only in the belief of fans in the queerness within queerbaiting texts, but in the pleasure that many fans felt in their readings. After season four of *Sherlock* aired and there was no ‘big reveal’ of Sherlock’s love for John, many fans were devastated. One twenty-seven-year-old, non-binary fan described the feeling of watching *Sherlock* before they realized they had been queerbaited as the world making “sense.” They said they felt “joyful” and in a “childlike” state of “knowing and trusting” that their queer readings were indicative of the creators’ intentions to present explicit queer narratives; however, they were forcibly removed from this state when an adult destroyed their innocent and naïve trust in them. This response highlights how childhood innocence is a method through which fans attempt to demonstrate children’s (and their own) lack of agency over the production of queer representation in media and, thus, the knowledge of possible queer adulthoods. The moment of queerbaiting retroactively destroyed these memories of enjoyment as they no longer represented childlike pleasures of knowing and trusting. Instead, these moments became evidence of exploitation. Their world no longer made sense as their trust in their ability to “know” was betrayed.

The childlike state of naivety identified by my participants was often coupled with notions of vulnerability in children. Vulnerability proved to be fundamental to the conceptualization and mobilization of childhood innocence within queerbaiting politics. When asked what effect queerbaiting may have on young people, the Polish

fan quoted earlier replied: “It may break them to the point where they would believe that they were just stupid and how could they be anything but hetero? It may make them angry, that their struggles are a joke.” Queerbaiting is harmful in the eyes of fans because young (queer) people are vulnerable to its negative effects and, therefore, the responsibility of media creators to produce “positive” queer representation is even greater. So great is this responsibility to protect children in mainstream culture that James Kincaid writes “an unhappy child was and is unnatural, an indictment of somebody: parent, institution, nation” (80). Children are understood to be vulnerable as their happiness is purportedly out of their control. They are seen to have no agency in attaining the objects or entering into the systems and institutions that promise happiness (see Ahmed).

Because children are believed to have no agency over their happiness, it is therefore the responsibility of adults (creators of media) to protect them and to minimize or erase all things that threaten their happiness, such as queerbaiting. One twenty-year-old *Supergirl* (The CW) fan from the USA stated that queerbaiting “sends a bad message, especially to any younger audiences.” The “bad message” is one that does not affirm queerness in young people, causing them unhappiness. However, the fan clarifies by stating that queerbaiting is *especially* harmful to younger audiences as they are vulnerable to the bad messages that queerbaiting supposedly sends. Elizabeth Bridges similarly asserts that queerbaiting “defies ethics” (129) because it punishes viewers by proxy in ways that parallel the long history of censorship and punishment of queers on screen. Vulnerability for Bridges is crucial in her criticism of queerbaiting as it is the powerlessness and lack of agency of these young queer viewers that makes them vulnerable to its harms. A clear model of power as age-based possession emerges here that proves foundational for Bridges and fans in their queerbaiting critique. Young queer viewers are positioned as vulnerable to the harms of queerbaiting precisely because they have no power or agency in the production of media, nor in the possession of the positive representations that enable them to overcome their experience of “trauma and rejection” (Bridges 129). Creators of media possess power and agency through the ability to hold and produce these representations, furthering feelings of exploitation in many fans and creators “defying ethics” in their continued queerbaiting. The child in queerbaiting critique, I suggest, relies on notions of vulnerability and a distinct opposition between the supposed power and agency of adults (creators of media) and the powerlessness of children (fans). I argue that such a distinction, although might be successful in criticizing exploitative media,

reinforces rigid notions of agency in a conservative reliance on childhood innocence.

Power, Agency, and Representation

The underlying assumption in these queerbaiting critiques is that media has a substantial influence over the formation and cultivation of a sexual identity and subjectivity. Fans view media as crucial for vulnerable queer young people to counter the harmful ideas they receive and internalize about queerness. As four fans explain,

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

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

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

I think representation is fundamental. I personally could not imagine myself with a woman in a relationship until I saw positive representation of it (33, bisexual, Italy).

As argued above, young queer people are considered vulnerable as they are denied the possibilities of happiness in adulthood that are inextricably bound to heteronormativity. Media, therefore, can provide affirming images of alternative possibilities, enabling an intelligible, queer futurity. As the MCU fan quoted earlier said, negative stereotyping in queer media "makes it harder for queer youth to recognize their own identity." Therefore, as another fan argued, queerbaiting is especially cruel to "younger kids desperate for representation" (34, queer, USA). In this way, images of queers in media that are not queerbaiting are viewed by fans as empowering. Fans are empowered by the images of possible queer adulthoods that

construct queerness as livable. It is precisely this power that is at the heart of queerbaiting.

Media creators accused of queerbaiting are frequently viewed as operating from a position of power over the production of media, with fans in a clear position of disempowerment. As I have argued elsewhere:

Rather than seeing their interpretation of the narrative as just one of many possible and equal readings of the text, fans see it as *the* meaning. Within debates of queerbaiting, fans have refigured and objectified queerness and positioned it as something that can be located within the text at the primary textual level, over which, they argue, the writers have full knowledge and control ... Fans utilize the notion of a singular, authentic narrative in this way to 'expose' the intentionality of the queerness they see, and therefore, the exploitative nature of queerbaiting. ("Contest" 136)

Contemporary queer political subjectivity for fans critical of queerbaiting relies on perceived operations of power. The model of power and agency in earlier accounts of slash fiction communities allowed fans to decenter the authority of the creators in the production of queer textual meaning, reparative readings, and community (Bacon-Smith 219). For earlier slash fans, disempowerment came from the risk of being exposed or outed as a slash fan, requiring them to operate in secrecy and under the assumption that their writings and artwork would only be consumed by other like-minded fans. Yet, there seemed to be little attempt to mobilize around a position of disempowerment to encourage creators to move subtextual queer readings into the explicit, denotative textual level. Contemporary fans, however, have refigured notions of agency within the discourse of queerbaiting. Power and agency over textual meaning is evacuated in any positionality of fans within queerbaiting discourse.

I suggest that the function of agency in queerbaiting presents a liberationist model of power. In this model, power is viewed as possessive where the only way to resist power is to possess it for oneself. For example, in explaining why heteronormative society may be threatened by increased visibility of queers in media, one twenty-six-year-old, bisexual fan of *Rizzoli and Isles* stated that "[p]eople in power, or people who have a lot of representation, feel threatened when others get power or representation because I think they're afraid they'll one day be treated like those who have less power and representation." There is a clear distinction between those who have power and those who do not. For this participant, and many other fans, representation is seen as both the visual indication

of power as well as how power can be attained. This model of power embodied through the visual representation of queers is foundational for fans in their conception of queerbaiting's harms and the dynamic between (queer) fan and (hetero) creator. Creators possess the representations, or the ability to produce these representations, and with them, affirming possibilities of a queer adulthood, whereas queer (young) viewers do not possess this power over the production of queer meanings.

For fans, this power dynamic is implicitly linked with age. The assumption is that creators of media are much older than the younger demographic of viewers. What follows from this, I argue, is the liberal belief that social justice and social, political, and economic equality are gained in the passing of time, operating in a linear fashion. This belief suggests that older people in general hold less progressive values than younger people and, therefore, simply waiting until enough time has passed will result in the success of progressive movements. Several fans I spoke with conceptualized 'older generations' as being more homophobic and therefore less likely to permit positive queer representation:

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

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

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

These examples indicate a very clear image of linear progress. The reliance on the mythical linearity of progress positions younger fans (and themselves) as not only

holding less harmful beliefs, but also of being part of the progress that is undoing the harms of older generations (in which the creators of queerbaiting media are often grouped). The last quote is particularly striking within this context of the politics of the child. They suggest that the connection between “better queer representation” and their students telling their teachers of their trans identity demonstrates the clear political positioning of many of the fans within queerbaiting. This representation, the argument follows, “can only be a good thing.” Increased visibility is seen as a marker of and a method to social and cultural liberation of queer people, as evidenced by young, vulnerable, queer people feeling comfortable about coming out at a younger age than in previous years. Their conception of the linearity of progress connected to queer visibility in media highlights a restriction in its politics. “Can only be a good thing” suggests that there is no possible opposition to these politics when its effects are seen as positive for children. The image of a child functions here, just as it did in conservative futurity politics, to shut down the conception of a politics outside of the domain of the child. Queerbaiting, I argue, is therefore seen as opposing this linear progress and futurity by restricting the affirming possibilities of a future for the queer child. By positioning themselves as without agency, fans imply that queerbaiting shuts down the possibility of queerness being intelligible, authentic, and livable.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted how agency is being reworked and mobilized in contemporary fandom through an analysis of the politics of childhood innocence within queerbaiting discourse. With the internet, fans can unite, create, mobilize, share and criticize like they never have before. Yet, as I have demonstrated in this paper, the position of powerlessness is crucial for the critique of queerbaiting. Fans may feel the desire to exercise agency in their fandom by criticizing creators, sharing and uniting in their feelings of disappointment, or reading and producing slash fiction to actualize in their creative content what was never delivered in the text; however, I observe that within queerbaiting discourse, agency is stripped in order to lay blame onto the creators and criticize what is deemed exploitative and harmful representation. Childhood innocence is invoked because it not only invigorates political claims of harm whereby children are seen as the ultimate victims, but children are seen to embody the lack of agency that fans position themselves as having within the dynamic of queerbaiting.

I argue that within queerbaiting politics, a futurity is centered in fan conceptions of harm. Queerbaiting is harmful, according to fans, because it closes off possibilities of a happy future for queer children. This future takes the form of images of a queer happy adulthood both on screen and in their own lives. This paper has shown that fans involved in queerbaiting debates believe that media imagery is a primary space for a renegotiation of access to happiness as it orients young queer people towards a future adulthood. By seeing images of queer people that are not queerbaiting, fans claim that vulnerable, young queer people are able to realize their sexuality as well as work to counter homophobic and heteronormative ideas they have internalized. I agree that media representation plays a substantial role in the formation and cultivation of queer identity. However, I suggest that such a focus on childhood innocence and an evacuation of agency within representational politics forecloses a multitude of engagements and queer pleasures of fandom.

Queerbaiting discourse presents interesting shifts in the mobilization of a theory and politics of the child. By focusing on a specifically queer child, that is, a child queered by their same-sex desire and/or gender nonconformity, fans present a challenge to the notion that futurity always reinforces heteronormative, patriarchal politics. Criticisms of queerbaiting utilize notions of childhood innocence and vulnerability, however, they do so by specifically asserting that such innocence and vulnerability is embodied because of a child's queerness, not their lack of it. Fans conceptualize the protection of children and childhood sexuality (or children's healthy growth into adult sexuality) as enacted by preventing adult intervention. In this way, the queer child is harmed because they experience adult intervention of homophobic and heteronormative ideology. Such ideas strip them of agency and power in their knowledge of possible queer adulthoods, in the ability to see and know queerness as authentic and livable. A liberationist model of power is present here when fans position the sexuality of the queer child as intrinsic and vulnerable to the intervention of a heteronormative society and negative representation (queerbaiting). Creators of media possess power whereas queer children do not. As I have argued, fans conceive of representation as a way for queers to gain power. It is through the knowledge of possible adulthoods and entry into life narratives of happiness that empower young queer children. We can see that contemporary queerbaiting discourse is centered on a futurity and an evacuation of agency that is shored up in wider representational politics.

Representation undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the development and affirmation of queerness for young people. The repeated punishment and killing of

queer people on screen, as Bridges points to, clearly presents a problematic depiction of queers considering the responsibility that media creators are deemed to have in the affirmation of queerness. I argue that the baiting of queerbaiting inevitably points to capitalistic exploitation by appropriating queerness in a particular way to repackage, repurpose and sell it back to the consumer in increasingly palatable ways. I observe that for many fans, the killing of queer characters or the relegation of them to subtext demonstrates the harm and the exploitation of audiences' desire to see queerness on screen. This exploitation, despite relying on the authority of authorial intent, is of course problematic, belonging to a long history of queer capitalism and the "pink dollar" (see Hennessy 32; Sender 1), as well as censorship and punishment (Bridges 115). However, I suggest that this illustrates the loss of queer pleasure of reparative readings. There is no room for pleasure or play in subtextual readings of queerness, nor in the anticipation of will-they-won't-they modes of storytelling. Rather than enjoying the "queer" in queerbaiting, the intentions of creators are centered in contemporary fandom, inevitably intertwined with capitalistic exploitation that saps the queer from queerness, resulting in contemporary queer fandom feeling left with bait.

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