Fantasy films and television series have generally taken an ambivalent position toward homosexuality. On the one hand, the genre has omitted representations of gay characters or displaced homosexuality onto the victims, villains, or nonhuman others. Hence, from a queer theoretical perspective, homosexuality has been represented as a threat to the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity. On the other hand, deconstructionist practices have revealed how the other may be read as a form of cultural resistance and a powerful metaphor for gay men and women. However, a few 21st-century fantasy series are breaking the tradition by representing characters and themes explicitly marked as gay. Using a textual analysis of two contemporary fantasy series (Torchwood and True Blood), this study illustrates how the inclusion of gay characters rearticulates this ambivalent position of the fantasy genre toward homosexuality. The ambivalence no longer serves to read the others as metaphors for homosexuality and/or queerness, but allows us to imagine queer subject positions and transgressive norms and values in close relation to actual gay characters.

Keywords: Torchwood; True Blood; Gay Representation; Queer Theory; The Fantastic

Introduction

Nan Flanagan: We're citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic civil rights...just like everyone else.

Bill Maher: Yeah, but...I mean, come on. Doesn't your race have a rather sordid history...of exploiting and feeding off innocent people for centuries?

Nan Flanagan: Three points. Number one, show me documentation. It doesn't exist. Number two, doesn't your race have a history of exploitation? We never
owned slaves, Bill, or detonated nuclear weapons. Most importantly, point number
three, now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood, which satisfies all of
our nutrition needs, there is no reason for anyone to fear us . . . We just want to be
part of mainstream society. (True Blood, season 1, episode 1)

As many film and television scholars (Benshoff, 1997; Jenkins, 1995; Pearson, 2008)
have noted, the representation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters in the fantastic
has been complicated. The genre generally omits representations of characters who are
explicitly marked as gay1 and those few characters who are ostensibly gay are either
victims or villains. However, the lack of gay characters does not imply a lack of
homosexuality in the fantasy genre, since the characters marked as other are often
figured as homosexual. Female vampires have been repeatedly depicted as seeking
young and helpless women (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 381), as iconic monsters (e.g., the
vampire, the mad scientist, the man with a double identity), and have figured as men
with a secretive and monstrous sexual lifestyle (Benshoff, 1997, pp. 47–48), and aliens
have been represented as a threat to the nuclear family (Pearson, 2008, pp. 14, 21).
Hence, the fantasy genre keeps out gay characters who are either human or heroic,
while representing homosexuality as a threat to heteronormativity.

However, a few 21st-century fantasy series are explicitly dealing with homosexuality.
The question that arises is what the inclusion of gay characters and themes
implies for the fantastic and vice versa. Even though gay characters have increased in
television fiction, many media scholars (e.g., Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Battles & Hilton-
Morrow, 2002; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006) demonstrate that gays are often
represented as aspiring to become part of heteronormative society. Scholars engaged
in queer theory (e.g., Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1985; Warner, 1999)
interpret heteronormativity as the discursive power granted to the compulsory
heterosexual matrix in Western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of
gender and sexuality, and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning
universalism and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. In this way, it
succeeds in depreciating, despising, or excluding those who do not comply with or
conform to the demands of the heteronormative discourse materialized in
institutions (e.g., marriage), practices (e.g., reproduction), and a rigid set of norms
and values (e.g., stability, monogamy, longevity). For those who experience sexual
desires that are other than exclusively heterosexual, heteronormative society offers
few possibilities. The defining homo/hetero opposition channels all subjects into
embodying a fixed sexual identity, which is defined by the sex of the person they feel
attracted to (Warner, 1999). As a consequence, many are compelled to claim a sexual
minority identity or seek for inclusion and recognition by heteronormative
institutions by incorporating heteronormativity. Duggan (2002) stresses that these
aspirations – which she considers to be homonormativity – curtail sexual freedom
and sexual diversity. Hence, gay characters who assume homonormative subject
positions only preserve the superiority of the heterosexual matrix.

This article departs from a cultural studies’ perspective that underscores the
importance of being represented (Gauntlett, 2008; Hall, 1997), and being represented
in a way that does not affirm preexisting stereotypes, that does not harm and/or offend people who might recognize themselves in the representations of gays, and that ensures a rounded and heterogeneous interpretation of what it means to be gay. As a consequence, predominantly depicting gayness as homonormative jeopardizes the emancipatory potential of gay representation. Since the inclusion of gay characters in fantasy series is only a recent phenomenon, this article studies how gay characters are represented and in what way they relate to heteronormativity. Specifically, it asks to what extent these series challenge heteronormativity and thereby articulate queer resistance.

Such an inquiry needs to take into account the ambivalent position of heteronormativity within the fantastic. On the one hand, the fantastic reproduces a hierarchical divide by representing the humans as heteronormative majority and the others as the nonnormative minority. For instance, Benshoff (1997, p. 284) points out that the gay monster is that which is often defeated and erased at the end of the story to restore heteronormativity. Creed’s (1990, p. 140) reading of science fiction films corresponds to Benshoff’s postulation. She argues that femininity is construed as the monster that needs to be repressed and controlled to preserve patriarchy and masculine supremacy. On the other hand, arguing that the fantastic only reiterates heteronormativity contradicts the genre’s potential to transgress the natural. Even though the fantastic has the possibility to express an unbridled imagination, it often refrains from boldly going where no one else has gone before. Horror and science fiction scholars (Clover, 2000; Sobchack, 1997; Telotte, 1995) urge reading this ambivalence as an intrinsic characteristic of the genre. They postulate that the fantastic exposes how contemporary Western society is marked by a desire for subversion or transgression, but also a need for stability and control. Hence, fantasy films and series are marked by a generic ambivalence that yields compliance with and resistance to hegemonic discourses. Focusing on the genre’s potential to resist heteronormativity, screened fantasy may thus represent queer characters and themes. Put differently, the fantastic may feature characters who do not consider their sexual identity and/or desires in terms of binary and exclusive categories, and/or assume subject positions that subvert or diverge from what is discursively constructed as normal in heteronormative institutions and practices. Hence, a fantasy text consists of queer elements when, for instance, a character embodies an identity that opposes or challenges heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality or embraces transgressive norms and values instead of the prescribed, traditional set of norms and values. Further, Doty (1995) argues that the genre conventions of horror “encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry” (p. 83). Pearson’s (2008) opinion matches Doty’s, as she considers science fiction able to provide spaces and temporalities outside of the heteronormative order.

Although these deconstructionist readings reveal textual ambiguities of the genre and show how the fantastic exposes the functioning of heteronormativity, it remains a genre marked by a lack of gay characters not represented as others. This corresponds with hooks’s (1992a) critique of how black characters and themes
have been represented in mainstream white culture. Even though black representation
has increased, the recurrent and persistent representation of black men and women as
the other only consolidates hegemonic white supremacy. hooks (1992b) argues that,
even though black female audiences have been able to adopt an oppositional gaze to
assess patriarchal representations of white womanhood critically, there remains a
necessity of providing transgressive representations of blackness. Jenkins (1995) and
Roberts (1999) make a similar argument when pointing out the necessity of including
manifest, outspoken, and heroic gay characters in the fantastic. Both authors argue
that resistant readings do not suffice, and stress the need for an actual gay character in
horror and science fiction. Jenkins (1995, p. 250) demonstrates his argument by
highlighting how Star Trek’s failure to include a gay character has left some gay
Trekkers disappointed, despite the significant amount of Star Trek slash fiction on
the Internet. Benshoff (1997) stresses that regardless of the potential power of reading
monsters as resistant and queer characters, there is a necessity for horror projects to
separate the monster from the gay man or woman and to defy the “virulent
stereotyping” these images proliferate and consolidate (pp. 285–286). Benshoff’s,
Jenkins’s, and Robert’s work mostly refer to screened horror and science fiction in the
20th century. However, the issues they have raised are still pertinent in an early 21st-
century context. Many popular fantasy series and films reiterate the genre’s
ambivalence that invites audiences to engage in queer reading practices but
suppresses the representation of actual gay characters.

Since Buffy, The Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), a few fantasy series feature openly
gay characters. To inquire what this implies for the genre’s ambiguous relation to
heteronormativity, I conducted a textual analysis of preselected episodes from the
British science fiction series Torchwood (2006–), a spin-off of Doctor Who (2005–),
and the American fantasy series True Blood, based on Charlaine Harris’s Southern
Vampire Series. Even though a few other shows represented homosexuality in an
explicit manner, I consider Torchwood and True Blood exemplary for the range of gay-
inclusive contemporary fantasy television fiction. Furthermore, I want to contribute
to the ongoing debate over the series’ transgressive potential. Needham (2009) and
Tyree (2009) demonstrate that Torchwood and True Blood produce counterhegemonic
meanings, whereas Boyer (2002) and Dunn (2010) are of the opinion that the series
fail to do so. I aim to illustrate that the series’ use of ambiguity—which typifies the
fantastic—in relation to explicit gay representation may be productive in articulating
queer resistance.

Gays, Queers, and Heroes

Obviously, a significant difference between regular screened fantasy products, on the
one hand, and Torchwood and True Blood, on the other, is the inclusion of characters
who express same-sex desire and engage in same-sex relationships. Fantasy films such
as the Alien series and The Lord of the Rings trilogy and television series such as Star
characters that can be read as gay and/or involved with another character from the
same sex (Jenkins, 1992; Jones, 2002; Melzer, 2006; Smol, 2004). However, what they actually depict on screen does not go beyond homosocial intimacy. To see these characters as gay, audiences have to read the intimacy and bonding between same-sex characters as signifying sexual attraction.

With Torchwood, Russell T. Davies has created a spin-off series centered on Doctor Who’s gay time agent, the American Captain Jack Harkness. Jack is in charge of the Torchwood unit in Cardiff, a special organization paid by the Crown whose main objective is to track down alien life on earth. Jack functions as the charismatic leader whose past experience has granted him the knowledge to interpret the actions of aliens and supernatural phenomena. Other team members also engage in same-sex intimacy: Owen Harper creates a diversion by using a device that fools a man into wanting to kiss him (season 1, episode 1); Gwen Cooper is seduced by a genderless alien who captured the body of a girl (season 1, episode 2); and Toshiko Sato sleeps with a female alien who pretends to be a female human being (season 1, episode 7). Yet, it is tea-boy Ianto Jones who becomes Jack’s long-lasting lover, and hence another prominent gay character. True Blood’s fictitious town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, harbors fewer outspoken gay characters than the Torchwood unit in Cardiff. Nonetheless, with Lafayette Reynolds, the series features a recurring and outspoken gay character. Lafayette is a close friend and colleague of Sookie Stackhouse, the series’ heroine.

Not only is the inclusion of characters who are explicitly marked as gay remarkable, but so is the variety of ways by which both series challenge heteronormativity. First, queer resistance is articulated in the way the series establish the sexuality of the gay characters. In Torchwood, the gay characters are never labeled as gay. Instead, their sexuality is represented by scenes of same-sex desire and same-sex intimacy. For instance, while formerly in love with a woman, Ianto becomes infatuated with Jack. When his sister starts inquiring about the rumors of her brother having “gone bender,” he argues that his feelings for Jack are beyond gender (season 3, episode 1). Ianto thus describes his desire and love as feelings that transcend binary categories of sexual orientation. Jack for his part never explains his sexuality. In a way, he assumes a queer subject position that defies the heteronormative hierarchy in which a sexual minority is obliged to come out to the heterosexual majority.

This does not imply that the series omits representations of Jack as a sexual human being. Jack expresses his sexuality through speech, gazes, and actions. This is demonstrated in the episode “Captain Jack Harkness” (season 1, episode 12), in which Jack and team member Toshiko get stranded in the past. They end up in the 1940s at a farewell dance for men who go off to war. In this episode, Jack accidentally encounters the captain whose name he borrowed after his death. The episode then focuses on the mutual attraction between both captains. Their attraction is first hinted at by the multiple reaction shots in which both men gaze at one another. Second, the physical attraction is made verbal when Jack says to Toshiko he never realized the soon-to-be-deceased captain was “so hot” (season 1, episode 12). Third, the same-sex attraction becomes visibly physical when Jack’s hand is touched by the other Jack while sitting in the lovers’ corner or, foremost, when Jack asks the other
Jack to dance, which results in a passionate kiss on the dance floor. By representing
the main characters as gay without fixing their sexual identity, *Torchwood* represents
gay characters whose sexuality is experienced from queer subject positions.

Jack’s unapologetic way of expressing his sexuality is shared by *True Blood*'s
Lafayette, who relies on his sexuality for some of his more personal professions
running a porn site and having sex with vampires in exchange for blood, which he
sells on the Black Market as the popular drug, V). In contrast to the white gay
characters in *Torchwood*, Lafayette embodies a black gay identity. As hooks (1992a)
and Dyer (1997) stress, whiteness is hegemonic in Western culture and thereby often
taken for granted. Representations of blackness may consolidate white supremacy if
incorporated into mainstream culture as the exotic other, but they may also resist the
unquestioned superiority of whiteness. Lafayette’s character is important as his
representation simultaneously rearticulates hegemonic notions of blackness and
homosexuality. Particularly, Lafayette performs his racial and sexual identity through
gender. As a stereotypical gay masculinity contrasts with a stereotypical black
masculinity, Lafayette’s embodiment of both unsettles and deconstructs the binary
and essentialist perspective on racial, gender, and sexual identity. For instance, in the
opening episode “Strange Love” (season 1, episode 1), Lafayette is introduced
cooking in the kitchen of the local bar, Merlotte’s, while commenting on Sookie’s
looks. His subsequent actions of pointing out her tan and her lipstick while hopefully
wondering if she is going on a date depicts him as the asexual gay best friend. This
stereotype, however, is quickly defied the moment Lafayette starts talking nasty.
Furthermore, provoked by one of the waitresses, Lafayette starts humping the stove,
while stressing that he “…got six gears on these hips.” Not only does this scene
illustrate his pride in being gay, but the fact that Lafayette performs the sexually active
and hence traditional masculine position in his sexual encounter with the stove
emphasizes the different queer subject positions Lafayette assumes.

Besides articulating gay identities as queer, *Torchwood* and *True Blood* feature
storylines built around the gay characters that unsettle and subvert the consolidation
of compulsory heterosexuality by offering transgressive reinterpretations of hetero-
normative institutions, practices, norms, and values. In both series, this practice relies
on an iconic characteristic of the fantastic, namely its ability to imagine the
unimaginable (Sobchack, 1997). Particularly, both series reimagine historical and
contemporary sociocultural spaces that are generally assumed heteronormative,
heterosexist, and homophobic. In *Torchwood*, this is illustrated in the dance sequence
of the already discussed episode “Captain Jack Harkness” (season 1, episode 12). In
the final sequence, Jack walks over to the other Jack to ask him to dance. While both
men start dancing in the middle of the ballroom, the other heterosexual pairs stop
dancing. The band, however, plays on and most of the soldiers and their girlfriends
seem to support the gay romance blossoming before their eyes. What is thus being
defied and reimagined is a historical context of homophobic oppression and a
socioculturally forced invisibility of gay men and women. Instead of experiencing
closeted and unrequited desire, the captains express their desire for one another with
an intimate dance and passionate kiss in the middle of a public dance floor. Instead of
a shocked, disapproving, or violent majority, most of the other men and women seem deeply touched. The scene is significant as it represents a historically situated public space as a queer public space where same-sex romance can be publicly experienced and expressed. Hence, by deconstructing and reconstructing public spaces that Halberstam (2005) describes as “heteronormative spatialities” (p. 5), the series represents queer and viable versions of sociocultural environments often equated with heteronormative oppression.

This specific articulation of resistance can also be spotted in the episode “Day One” (season 3, episode 1), where Ianto’s sister asks Ianto if he is gay. Ianto himself hushes his sister after she asked him about being gay, presumably out of fear that his young niece might hear of his same-sex desires. His reaction shows the omnipresence of heteronormativity and how the discourse governs sexuality into legitimate and illegitimate forms. It also illustrates the pervasiveness of this discourse, since Ianto himself reiterates the idea that there is a hierarchical difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, the scene then defies the susceptibility of heteronormativity. Ianto may be incorporating a heteronormative fear of being different; his sister laughs off his fear by casually informing Ianto that her daughter has a friend with two mothers. Similarly, when her husband comes home, he mocks Ianto by calling him a “gay boy [who is] taking it up the arse” while giving him a big hug. Even though the husband relies on a rather rigid imagination of gay men, his heartfelt hug may read as a refutation of assumed homophobia within a working class environment (e.g., Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007).

In True Blood, a similar representation of a working-class environment is created. Even more than in Torchwood, the citizens of Bon Temps are represented as part of the working class. Lafayette is no exception (e.g., his jobs, his home, his friends). Taking into account that the series is set in the Deep South, Lafayette’s colliding identity articulations of blackness and homosexuality provoke a social and political context of homophobic and racial oppression—provocations that are also evoked by the series’ sultry opening credits that feature documentary-like footage of religious fanaticism, xenophobia, and civil rights strikes intertwined with imagery connoting both the historical and contemporary Deep South. The series departs from this context to subvert it. For instance, in the episode “Strange Love” (season 1, episode 1), Lafayette starts flirting with a big white man sitting at the bar in Merlotte’s. Though neither the man nor his reactions are implied to be gay, Lafayette does not refrain from saying that he likes a big man, and suggests the man could be his “Santa Claus.” The man at the bar defies the stereotype of the violent heterosexual redneck, as he remains shy and unmoved by Lafayette’s blunt flirtation. Meanwhile, Lafayette provokes the notion that public space is privileged for heteronormative practices. He articulates his same-sex desire in a straightforward manner, and assumes a superior position toward the “big white man.” This particular scene shows how True Blood invests in imaging public environments that are rid of homophobia and racism.

Finally, these characters are represented as heroes. Especially in a context of fantasy, this aspect tackles both the absence of characters explicitly marked as gay and the representation of gays as villains or victims. The most obvious gay hero of both series
is Torchwood’s Jack Harkness. He often assumes the role of hero in his efforts to keep his team members safe and boldly engaging in several fights. This does not avoid a display of patriarchy or masculine superiority on his behalf, which is often challenged and mocked by the other team members. However, their mocking does not suppress their devotion and love for their leader. For both the male and female team members, Jack is their hero. Furthermore, Jack is a superhero because he cannot die. The series also mocks the absence of gay heroes in many “masculine” genres (e.g., fantasy, western, action). In the episode “Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang” (season 2, episode 1), Captain John Hurt, ex-lover and nemesis of Jack, is introduced. The reunion of both men is set in a deserted bar, and the representation of the reunion evokes the genre of the western. The scene begins as a pastiche of an iconic duel between rival cowboys. From the shot of Jack’s feet walking through the revolving doors, over the close-ups of their stern-looking eyes, to an accelerated cutting between both men running toward one another with their weapons drawn. Defying viewer expectations, the pastiche ends when the first encounter between the men turns out to be a passionate kiss, a kiss that only briefly stalls the fight. To the sound of their own laughter and the score of Blur’s rock classic Song 2, both men quickly resume their brawl. As such, the scene mostly reads as a parody of the cowboy as an established image of masculinity and heterosexuality. By teasing out the same-sex attraction that slumbers between male rivals, buddies, or heroes in many “masculine” genres (e.g., western, action, fantasy), Torchwood questions the exclusive and superior status of heterosexual masculinity in these genres. On the other hand, it needs to be acknowledged that Jack is represented as an all-American white hero and thereby embodies a gay identity that Puar (2007) would describe as homonormative and homonational. His representation may unsettle the supremacy of the heterosexual male, but his normative and patriarchal masculinity hardly challenges the heterosexual matrix.

Next to Jack, True Blood’s Lafayette is far from a typical hero. The image of a black and genderfluid hero already reads as an inversion of the homonormative heroic ideal. Throughout the first season, he is represented as a caring man. He is often involved in scenes that show him taking care of family members and friends, and repeatedly stresses that he will protect them if necessary. A few scenes also depict his physical strength. In one of these scenes, he takes up the role of hero for the gay community. The scene begins with Lafayette addressing some rude male customers who mocked the fact that a gay man made their food. One of them postulates that he ordered a “hamburger deluxe” instead of an “AIDS burger.” In a strong voice, Lafayette tells the man that “…faggots been breeding your cows, raising your chickens, even brewing your beer alone even before I walked my sexy ass up in this mother fucker. Everything on your god damned table got AIDS” (season 1, episode 5). As the man refuses once more to eat the burger, Lafayette knocks down all three customers at once, and shouts that, upon entering Merlotte’s, they have to eat the food the way he makes it. In this specific scene, Lafayette illustrates his potential for heroism on several levels. First, he mocks the prejudice that any gay man has AIDS, and highlights the omnipresence of gay men in everyday life. Second, he subverts the dominant image of the heterosexual male superhero when he displays his strength by...
singlehandedly overturning three seemingly tough men. It does not surprise us that, before he leaves the customers’ table, he reminds the men to tip their waitress. He utters it in a stoic manner, yet accompanied by elegant hand gesticulations that underscore each of his words. In this way, the scene accomplishes two things: it represents Lafayette as an archetypical hero whose final words to the defeated villains chiefly function to underscore the hero’s moral and physical superiority, and it queers Lafayette’s heroic identity by letting him express his final words in a campy manner. To conclude, both Torchwood and True Blood engage in representing explicitly gay heroic characters. By expressing same-sex desires in their hero persona, both men articulate a heroic identity that challenges the heteronormative convention of fantasy to represent gayness as desexualized and heroism as explicitly heterosexual. Whereas Jack corresponds to the socially acceptable image of a homonormative hero, Lafayette more than once queers the traditional image of the all-American hero. Instead of protecting the heteronormative nation, Lafayette uses his heroic capacities to question and fight working class, racist, and sexual prejudices.

Victims, Villains, and Vampires

Torchwood and True Blood depict actual gay characters and use these representations to challenge heteronormativity. The invisibility of overtly gay characters in the fantastic is thus resisted by representing same-sex desire beyond the subtextual level of homoerotic teasing. Yet, the series do insert instances where gay characters rather function as villains or victims, or where homosexuality is articulated as a subtextual characteristic of the other. Since the series transcend the generic way the fantastic has articulated queer resistance by representing gay characters and themes as queer, a question emerges: what does the reiteration of the representation of homosexuality as other imply for the texts’ potential to resist heteronormativity?

The role of the gay victim is the first stereotypical role reiterated in representations of homosexuality. Fantasy films or series that hint at homosexuality often displace homosexuality onto the body of a nonheroic character who lacks power and/or agency. Consider the male protagonist of A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy’s Revenge (1985). Not only is the character represented as a sensitive boy who is more oriented toward men, but his fear of villain Freddy Krueger functions as a metaphor for the boy’s internal struggle with his same-sex desires and internalized homophobia (Benshoff, 1997, pp. 246–250). Though the film deconstructs how heteronormativity disciplines individuals who experience same-sex desires, it depends upon its audiences to read this film in terms of queer resistance. Furthermore, by victimizing the potentially gay boy, it reinstates the heterosexual male as the real hero.

In True Blood, the victim trope of the fantastic returns in the second season when Lafayette becomes victimized. His illegal dealing of vampire blood gets him into trouble with Eric Northman, the vampire sheriff of District 9 (season 2, episode 2). For that reason, Eric imprisons Lafayette in a cellar at the Fangtasia nightclub. Cuffed to a giant wheel, covered in the blood of his devoured cellmate, and almost stripped naked, the strong hero looks angst-ridden and vulnerable despite his attempts to
resist the position of a victim throughout the rest of the episode. First, during an interrogation, he refutes the assertion vampire Pam made about him being a prostitute: “Don’t get it twisted, honey cone. I’m a survivor first, a capitalist second, and a bunch of shit after that. But a hooker, dead last.” Even though his extravagant clothing has been stripped off, Lafayette’s words are fuelled with anger, camp, and self-confidence. Second, he falls back on transgressive skills of survival when he gets rid of his own shackles by using a piece of metal that he chewed out of the torn-off prosthetic leg of his dead cellmate. Third, he tries seducing the daytime guard Ginger, who is aiming a gun at him because she was warned to “pay special attention to the faggot drag queen in the basement.” However, neither his smooth talk nor his foulmouthed threatening convinces the guard to let him go. Instead, he is brought back to the sheriff and proposes that Northman could turn him into a vampire: “I am already a person of poor moral character.” With this proposition, he eventually confirms his role as victim, and invites audiences to consider his queerness as inferior to what is considered morally normal in contemporary society. In doing so, the scene reaffirms the hierarchical binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and points out the misfortunes that await a character who strays from the heteronormative path. Despite reiterating the victim trope, True Blood sets itself apart by having a victim who acknowledges his same-sex desires and who repeatedly acts as a hero. In fact, Lafayette’s character is representative for the ambivalence of the show. True Blood both celebrates and empowers queer subject positions and denounces certain queer practices in favor of homonormativity.

The series also reiterate the stereotypical role of the gay villain. Like the victim trope, the villain trope in the fantastic can be interpreted in terms of queer resistance. For instance, evil-minded Dr. Septimus Pretorius in Bride of Frankenstein (1935) fits the stereotype of the gay villain who (deviously) longs for the company of other men and who embodies a masculine identity that collides with the archetype of the heterosexual man (Benshoff, 1997, p. 50). In Torchwood, Captain John Hurt assumes the role of villain. He is introduced in the episode “Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang” (season 1, episode 2) as an extraordinary character who wears a 17th-century outfit, holds a different set of morals, and who becomes romantic about the infinite potentialities of time and space. In contrast to the subtextual gay villain, John’s sexual desires in men and women are manifestly represented. He kisses Jack passionately, flirts with Toshiko and Gwen, and addresses his hypersexual commentary to almost every man and woman he encounters. John affirms the horror cliché of an evil in disguise as he fools the Torchwood team into helping him recover three dangerous devices spread out over the city, which in fact are elements of a key that will reveal the location of a rare diamond. Foremost, since he grafts his fooling onto strategies of seduction, he also evokes the stereotype of the gay predator. Again, the fantastic is challenged by the depiction of a sexual human being who explicitly desires men and women. Moreover, his gay identity is unmistakably queer, since he refuses to define his sexuality by strict categories and organizes his life beyond heteronormative temporalities and spaces. The series then reinstalls ambivalence by revealing John as a vicious impostor and thus confirms the stereotypes of gay villain and predator.
These examples illustrate both how ambivalence remains a key characteristic of the fantastic and how the inclusion of gay characters and themes alters the signification of ambivalence. The ambivalence is no longer the key to imagine same-sex desires on screen—since homosexuality is being explicitly depicted—but is used instead to imply ambiguous positions on how these desires should be experienced and how a gay man or woman should organize his or her life. However, *True Blood* complicates the ambivalence of the fantastic even more by featuring not only humans who are explicitly marked as gay, but also nonhuman others who express same-sex desires and nonhuman others who only connote homosexuality. This obfuscates the potential for queer resistance, as the integration of the nonhuman others in mainstream society—which is the main setup of the series—rather functions as a mirror for the way contemporary societies expect minorities to conform to dominant norms and values. Even though this metaphor certainly qualifies as cultural resistance to the way Western society privileges whiteness, middle-class values, and compulsory heterosexuality, it depends on audiences to uncover the multiplicity of societal criticisms this metaphor harbors. However, the inclusion of both nonhumans who are gay and nonhumans who connote homosexuality offers the opportunity to approach sexuality and sexual identity politics from a plenitude of perspectives not yet imagined in screened fantasy. Most prominently, the way the series represents the discord surrounding norms and values within the vampire community parallels the debate within the gay community between those who want civil rights but refrain from questioning the heteronormative center that defines what civil rights are and those who refuse to renounce their queerness and thereby question heteronormativity.

The opening sequence of the episode “Strange Love” (season 1, episode 1) is a fine example of this discord from a sociocultural and political perspective. The central setting is a road store at night where a gothic store clerk is watching a talk show with Bill Maher. Bill is interviewing Nan Flanagan, a young white woman who represents the American Vampire League. In the interview, she underscores her American identity: “We’re citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic civil rights...just like everyone else.” She further counters Bill’s reproach of the vampires’ history of exploiting innocent people by addressing the lack of documentation, the human history of exploitation, and the invention and mass-production of synthetic blood that satisfies their nutrition needs. By using arguments that mostly seek out the similarities between the vampire minority and the human majority, and assuring the established majority rights and norms, the mainstream political agenda of vampires rather reads as a plea for civil rights that will aid integration. Consequently, her white, middle-class identity is represented as the instantiation of the assimilationist discourse she promotes. Other vampire identities are implied to be illegitimate or amoral. From a queer perspective, she thus represents gay men and women who aspire to homonormativity. However, the sequence also depicts a vampire who struggles with the assimilationist agenda. The focus in the scene shifts from the talk show to an elated heterosexual couple who stumble in to ask the store clerk whether he knows where they could buy some V. The gothic store clerk, who has long, black hair, pale skin, and satanic jewelry, responds by pretending to be a vampire, faking a
foreign accent, and lusting after the girl. After she starts crying, the store clerk breaks down his charade. Her boyfriend seems to have enjoyed the store clerk’s performance and again asks for some V. Another man in the store is clearly angered by the vampire-phobic behavior of the boy and store clerk, and asks the young couple to leave the store. The boy does not move and insults the man by saying, “Fuck you, Billy Bob.” His insult becomes reversed as the man reveals his fangs and replies, “Fuck me? I’ll fuck you, boy. I’ll fuck you, and I’ll eat you.” At first sight, the vampire echoes Nan Flanagan, as he does not embody the ubiquitous stereotypes and is represented as an everyday guy. However, in revealing his fangs and threatening the boy, this vampire can be read as a person weighing up whether to be mainstream and blend in with the rest of society, or to “come out of the coffin” and rise up against vampire phobia.

True Blood further explores this ambiguity toward mainstream society by representing gay vampires. Thereby, the series curtails the range of discourses that can be projected onto the body of the vampire and stimulates audiences to reflect on the similarities between vampires and gays. Lafayette is not the only character torn between conflicting desires for transgression and compliance; the gay vampires articulate desires for homonormativity and queerness. Eddie Gautier, for instance, is a well-behaved vampire who lives in a suburban house and stays at home to watch television. Watching Heroes (2006–2010) on Monday seems to be his most radical activity. Still, to fulfill his sexual needs, he offers his blood in exchange for sex with Lafayette, and thus engages in queer sexual practices. In contrast to Eddie, who aspires to integrate, vampires such as villainous Malcolm or Sophie-Anne Leclerc, the mad vampire queen of Louisiana, position themselves outside human society. Both emphasize their vampire identity, assume superior positions toward human beings, and mock other vampires who express the desire to be mainstream. Though their norms and values are queer, the villainous gay vampires experience their queer and vampire identities in an essentialist way. As such, the series exposes how in the struggle of norms, the resisting minority can assume an equally essentialist and oppressive position toward the hegemonic norms and values of the majority.

Queer-normative vampires are only one of many ways both fantasy series explore the experience of sexuality. Yet they are exemplary for how the series use fantastic and realistic elements to represent the multiple and contesting ways gay subjects may experience their sexuality. Furthermore, both series acknowledge how sexuality intersects with one’s gender, race, and class identity and how these interrelations may hamper the expression and experience of sexuality. Whereas middle-class, white Jack has more freedom to express and play with his sexuality, the working-class, black, or vampire characters in both series experience their sexual identity in close relation to other forms of oppression governed by the discursive practices of heteronormativity.

Conclusion

By representing gay characters and themes in a genre renowned for omitting gay representation, Torchwood and True Blood join the range of 21st-century fantasy series that challenge the ambiguous position toward homosexuality in the fantastic. Both
series include main characters who express and experience same-sex desires and who are represented as self-confident and heroic. Yet, the stereotypical treatment of associating homosexuality with victims, villains, and nonhuman others is retained. As a consequence, the series may break with the tradition of keeping gays in the closet, but they produce a new kind of ambivalence regarding homosexuality. By representing same-sex desires and intimacy in an explicit manner, the ambivalence no longer serves to read the others as metaphors for homosexuality and/or queerness. It does continue to raise questions about sexuality, identity politics, and heteronormativity, but these questions are explicitly tied to actual gay characters and themes. Thereby, the fantastic engages in reimaging sexuality and sexual identity without dismissing the material and sociocultural condition of many gay men and women in contemporary Western society. Put differently, the series refrain from representing sexuality as a detached identity position and rather represent how it intersects with other identity components. Both series invest in representing queer appropriations of heteronormative or homophobic situations and underscore the difficulties in pursuing queerness when one is not only discriminated over being gay, but also over being black, working class, or a vampire. What sets \textit{Torchwood} and \textit{True Blood} apart from other fantasy television shows such as \textit{Buffy, The Vampire Slayer} – which features predominantly white, middle-class heterosexual characters – is this particular acknowledgement of how heteronormativity governs the sexual, gender, race, and class expressions and experiences of every subject. In both series, gay identities are ongoing negotiations between homonormativity and queerness. As such, the series are invested in revealing and exploring the ambiguity that typifies intersectional identities, letting their characters shift among moments of victimization and heroism, shame and pride, fear and desire, assimilation and resistance. In \textit{True Blood}, queer resistance is articulated in the way many characters transgress and undermine the heteronormative ideal. Because the characters are represented as both proud of their counterhegemonic identities and tired by and conflicted about by the way contemporary society aims to govern their identities, homonormativity is often implied as a desirable alternative to escape social control. The series equally expose this alternative as unbearable and impossible, since it tries to fix subjects into an essential identity that does not take into account the fluctuating and contradicting identity positions of the subject. In contrast, \textit{Torchwood} mainly represents white, male, gay characters embodying physical traits valorized in heteronormative discourse. The series does articulate queerness by unsettling the conventions of the fantastic to imagine explicit gay heroism.

Of course, this study analyzed only two contemporary fantasy series. A thorough investigation of other 21st-century fantasy series that include gay characters would certainly broaden the knowledge of the potentials and limits of queer resistance in the fantastic. The present study demonstrates how fantasy series like \textit{Torchwood} and \textit{True Blood} are fostering new ways to expose and resist heteronormativity. The series do so by reimagining environments often associated with racism and homophobia. They represent working-class environments as safe havens for gays who do not necessarily want to assume a homonormative identity and display a public sphere
where homophobia is either absent or easily defeated. Above all, they show how the fantastic as a realm is able to reflect upon mainstream society without displacing homosexuality onto the body of others and out of the text.

**Notes**

[1] From here on, I use the concept of gay to refer to those who are identified and/or self-identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual in contemporary Western society. As such, all men and women who may experience homosexual desires will be referred to as gay, even though these men and women may refer to themselves otherwise. The term homosexuality is used to refer to same-sex desire in general.


[3] With regard to *Torchwood*, the studied sample includes one episode of each season. Each episode has been selected because of its thematic relevance to the study. The sample features the episode entitled “Captain Jack Harkness” (season 1, episode 12), “Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang” (season 2, episode 1), and “Day One” (season 3, episode 1). With regard to *True Blood*, two episodes of the first season and one episode of the second season have been studied. The studied sample includes the episodes titled “Strange Love” (season 1, episode 1), “Burning House of Love” (season 1, episode 7), and “Keep This Party Going” (season 2, episode 2). Because of its specific relevance to the representation of heroism, one scene from the episode “Sparks Fly Out” (season 1, episode 5) has been studied too. I also acknowledge that the third season of *True Blood* further invests in gay representation, for instance by including new gay characters. However, at the time this study was conducted, the third season was not yet available to audiences outside of the United States. Last, it should be noted that this study also benefits from the author’s consistent following of both series.

[4] Since Cardiff, the city where *Torchwood* is set, is built on a rift in time and space, aliens and humans can move through time and space.

**References**


