

Queer Public
Queer Content
Air Date: July , 2019

Erin McGregor: Welcome back to the Queer Public, the podcast about real life queer life.

Today we're talking about all the places we go looking for ourselves. And right at our fingertips is the world of television—the good, the bad, the guilty pleasures and the transformative works of art. And in this technicolor world, sometimes we see ourselves, and sometimes—even in 2019—we don't. Today we're asking, what do we do as queer people, to transform the media we consume into truer, fuller representations of ourselves?

In this episode, we're talking to a bunch of rad queers. And None of us are pop-culture critics, and we're not here to tell you what to watch or what not to watch. We're here, as friends, to talk about some things we've loved and bonded over as queer people.

In the 90s TV landscape, there were few, if any, queer women to look up to. So if that's what you were looking for, you had to settle for the next best thing, Xena Warrior Princess starring Lucy Lawless. Xena was about a warrior princess on a journey to redeem herself after being a warlord. The two main characters on the show are women who travel together, and almost every episode have to save each other. Their relationship wasn't explicitly gay, the characters had male lovers. But The audience was convinced it was gay. To this day, Xena has a cult following of queers.

Ashley: Well as well as watching Xena there is always that battle between factions of the fandom of are there aren't they.

Mars: Right.

Ashley: And since I was in love was so young and you know as I think the same age like 11 or 12 I hadn't really come into my own so I was like well they're more than friends and they're maybe maybe not lovers but I was like you know they're soul mates whatever that means they're soul mates. And then I just referred to them as traveling buddies.

Mars: I mean I think that a lot of queer people who watch that show at first were like are they.

Mars: Aren't they. But then by the time you get to like season.

Ashley: Two two or three.

Mars: It's like no we're going to make up these excuses for them to put their mouths together. Xena needs this magical water. Gabrielle for some reason can only carry it in her mouth.

Mars: And she has to make out with her in order to get some water. Xena I feel like I kind of already knew that I was queer but. The speculation of a fictional character being queer because I wasn't around a ton of queer people at that time in real life was like oh maybe that's what this is and she looks really great in that outfit and why are they in a hot tub together.

Mars: Yes seems really really gay and not a thing that you necessarily do with your best friend.

Mars: It was like on during like the years where you're thinking about those kinds of things like 12 to 18 by the time I got to the end of the show was like a they're gay. B, So am i.

Erin: **In order to fill in the gap - the glaring question mark over Gabrielle and Xena's heads, there are archives of Fan fiction that queers their relationship.**

Ashley: The internet became a thing when I was in middle school and I discovered fan fiction.

Mars: Yes.

Ashley: And I discovered raunchy fan fiction. And I don't know why I thought this was a good idea. But I actually printed out one of the raunchier ten fictions and hid it under my mattress thinking my mother would not find it.

Mars: Never leave physical evidence.

Ashley: No. It is absolutely out. Leave it somewhere. Especially not when it's carpet cleaning day. And I'm going to move the bed.

Ashley: So I think Xena did help me figure myself out. As embarrassing as that was.

Erin M: **There are whole catalogues of fan fiction. This one called *Archive of Our Own* is an entire database of what feels like everything that has ever been written about anything: from Xena to Harry Potter, from the most mainstream network TV show to the most niche anime. I met someone whose life and queerness is intertwined with her experience consuming and creating fan fiction.**

Janelle: So my name's Janelle. I'm a Latina in New York City. And I'm 27.

Janelle: I first started reading fan fiction when I read the first Harry Potter book for everything I consumed. I would look up fan fiction immediately after because you just want more after you finish. So I was definitely always. Any movie book anything that I enjoyed as soon as it was done and I was left wanting more I would immediately run to look at fan fiction.

The ones I vividly remember reading when I was that young are we're all like female characters with other female characters. And I think that it did kind of make me comfortable early on with the idea of queerness and lesbian relationships and gay relationships because the fan fiction you know there it wasn't separated by you know this is lesbian or this is gay. Like all of the romantic fiction was just listed on the same page

regardless of who was in the romantic relationship. And I think that kind of gave me a certain open mindedness and life that I didn't find anywhere else.

Erin: Janelle becomes aware of the negative stigma surrounding the consumption and creation of fan fiction.

Janelle: When I was 11 I was extremely ashamed of my fanfiction writing habits. I would never tell anyone at school that I was writing fanfiction. I would be mortified if someone was coming up behind me and I was writing it. I'd minimize the window real quick. Seems like something that only losers would do. And I didn't want people to think I was a loser. And this actually was part of the reason that I quit writing fanfiction because you know I started when I was eleven twelve around 13 14 and I started getting all this teenage insecurity and self-doubt and this need to be cool.

So I kind of just deleted everything and ghosted my entire presence off of the Internet and didn't write again for the rest of high school or college because it just kind of seemed like this embarrassing childish thing that I shouldn't be doing.

Janelle: I never stopped reading fanfiction. I even though that was something I also didn't like talking to people about just the fact that I read fanfiction was a little bit embarrassing let alone thinking about writing it. So I was always on the periphery of the fan fiction community as a reader and a commenter. It never it never really left my interest.

Erin: Janelle grows up and one day, her life changes in an instant.

Janelle: And then in 2014 my mom got diagnosed with leukemia.

Janelle: So I had to kind of drop my entire life and quit my work and pack up my things and move out of my apartment in New York to go back home and take care of her.

Janelle:] I'm an only child so she didn't have anyone else who could be her caretaker while she was going through that.

She had leukemia. She she lived in the cancer ward at the hospital. Her immune system was so compromised that she couldn't leave.

Janelle: And I couldn't leave either. I couldn't really have visitors either because her immune system was so low that introducing her to any outside germs or bacteria whatsoever could give her a cold and that cold would kill her because she had no immune system. So it was extremely lonely because I couldn't go out to have a social life and my friends couldn't really come to visit me. I was just really bored all day and I on Tumblr one day actually I saw this gift set from this cartoon called miraculous ladybug that I had never heard of before but it looked cute.

Erin: Miraculous Lady bug is about a teenager named Marinette, who is secretly a super hero, Miraculous Ladybug. Her best friend ALia is an aspiring journalist who chronicles appearances of Miraculous Lady Bug but doesn't know that it's her own best friend. And Alia is really into the the Miraculous Lady Bug.

Janelle: She runs a fan site called The Lady blog and she's just obsessed with this superhero ladybug. And to me I interpreted it as she's in love with ladybug which means she is in love with her best friend and she has no idea which I found you know it was a really ritual for me to tap.

Janelle: So when I sat down and decided to write something with these characters I started just writing something pretty earnest and I didn't know what to do with it.

Erin: So Janelle writes a love story, a sweet, queer romance between Miraculous Ladybug and her best friend, Alia.

Janelle: I made a new Tumblr account that none of my friends would be able to trace back to me. And I posted these six pages of miraculous ladybug fan fiction and even that felt weird but I guess I was already in the situation where I'm watching cartoons again aimed for very little children. And I guess it felt kind of fun to like regress into like this child like you know bringing back my interest from my childhood.

Janelle: And I immediately got a response.

People were following and commenting and re blogging and liking.

Janelle: I went to sleep and when I woke up the next morning my brand new account that I had made just to post the six pages of writing had two hundred followers and they were so excited about my writing and asking me for more. And what happens next and I hadn't felt that in a really long time and I forgot how good it felt to have people I guess who are fans of you which you know when I was eleven, I also had a very similar sense of people being excited when I posted a new chapter and they would wait and they would ask me if I'm okay or what's wrong if I went a week without updating anything.

Erin: In the hospital Janelle finds her connection to the outside world, finds community and sheds the stigma around this thing that she loves. While all that is happening, her mom gets better! And they move out of the hospital, and Janelle ends up back in NY again. Now that her life is back to normal, Janelle doesn't write as much fanfiction, but it's still an important part of her life.

Janelle: I do still read fan fiction and it's actually kind of become a more enriching experience for me because I meet so many friends through the community. Other authors who would. You know reach out to me to say they love my work or who repeatedly left nice comments and they're all on the queer asexual spectrum too. So it's always knowing that. I can bring something to the table that they'll understand. And it's like having a writers group I love following what my friends are writing and what they're doing I love when they get stuck on something and I can help them. I had never found an online community that was mostly queer. Before this it's always kind of like people who don't really write it on their sleeve. But when somebody invites me to a group chat where everyone's using their screen names I can look them up and I can see you know oh they write all this awesome queer stuff so they must be queer or at least they understand it.

Erin: Fast forward to 2019. Queer characters are all over broadcast television and streaming media services. It is pretty rare to watch a show that doesn't have some sort of queer representation. And in the beginning, most of it is pretty problematic --

characters centered only on their coming out stories, or centered around a homogenized, stereotypical idea of queerness.

In 2018 GLAAD Released a report that stated that in the 2018 - 2019 season. 8.8 percent of series regulars on broadcast television are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer characters, up 6.4% from the year before. Male and female characters were represented equally and for the first time, L.G.B.T.Q. characters currently include more people of color (50 percent) than white people (49 percent). The report also states that CW has the most LGBTQ Characters in the 2018 - 2019 season.

in 2017, the CW Put Riverdale a tv show based on the Archie comics into development.

So the show comes out and right away there are problems. In the first episode, the show features a queer baiting kiss between the two straight female leads, Betty and Veronica, and fans freak. In these early episodes, there are also actually queer characters, like Kevin, but he's a white, cis gay guy who, at times, is a bit of a stereotype. So some fans are bummed, but they keep watching.

Before Riverdale's high-femme power couple--Cheryll Blossom and Toni Topaz--is revealed in season two, lots of queers latch on to a different character--Jughead Jones.

Even though Riverdale's Jughead is not written as a queer character, he gets adopted as a queer icon in a funny, good natured way. There is something about his wardrobe, his moodiness, his distinct refusal to participate in normative society that reads a little..... queer. So much so that Autostraddle wrote a "How to Dress Like Riverdale's Jughead Jones" style guide.

Erin McGregor: But it's more than that. Queers on the internet noticed this phenomenon and took to tumblr to document their experiences relating to Jughead as a queer character. Suddenly, Jughead was a thing.

Molly: I think something. About being like a. Queer non binary. Asexual spectrum. Person in the world in their late 20s. Is that. It is. Really difficult for me. To find someone who I feel like really represents the way that I see myself like so. So rarely do I see. True representation of myself. And like we could argue that this isn't true representation of myself because like this is. For the character a man in. A straight relationship. But I just think emotionally. It was like such a pure representation of myself like. It was just so Powerful to see myself emotionally in a character in a way that I like literally don't know if I've really ever experienced before.

Molly: My name is Molly Woodstock. I use they them pronouns and I am the creator of the Gender Reveal podcast.

Ariana: My name is Ariana Martinez. I used them pronouns and I'm the editor and sound designer at queer public.

Molly: The entire first season of Riverdale I had these like really really strong feelings whenever I saw Jughead on screen and I was really confused about it because I knew I

wasn't like sexually attracted to. For House or the character but I was having these like really really intense feelings and I couldn't figure out what they were. And finally I was like oh I just want to be Jughead like I'm like if we think about who Jughead is like Jughead is a writer Jughead is the leader of an organization that was founded by indigenous people. Jugs clothes are like flannels and this jean jackets and this one like perfectly distressed leather jacket jugheads dating a girl right. And so like Jughead as a male character might not be queer but if I put myself into a jughead who is dating a woman it becomes a queer relationship. Like I feel like I was just having a lot of sexual energy but I didn't want to direct it at Jughead and so I was just like OK having sexual energy when Jughead is onscreen but also not trying to have sex with Jughead or Coles sprouse. What is this. And then I was like oh I want to have sex with someone as Jughead.

Ariana: Yes, exactly.

Ariana: Like honestly almost word for word is exactly what I experienced how he dresses you know how he moves is also what was another thing like and I think the interplay between drug heads emotions and his intellect felt really real to me and felt like the way that I experience things and even the way he's like falls in love. He falls in love with Betty like in part because they're like solving mysteries together and they're using their brains together and they're friends first. And that's how I felt I felt in every single relationship I've ever had.

Molly: I think in a lot of the relationships whether that's Veronica and Archie's straight relationship or those relationships that Kevin, a gay character has,. Or Sheryl and Tony's relationship sometimes like the sex seems like a really important part of their relationship.

Molly: And also like very emotionally charged and very intense and very much what you'd think of and like any film in which you characters are having sex where they're sort of like ripping each other's clothes off and throwing each other against the wall and all that .

Molly: And I think Betty and jug heads relationship is just a lot like sweeter and slower where they're like already hanging out on the couch and like having a good time talking about their feelings and then they end up fucking which is like how I feel like it is to be gay.

Betty and Jughead the relationship is portrayed to us as so much more based on friendship and mutual support and understanding and trust and sex is more incidental or like sexuality and like sex drive is more incidental which again speaks to me more as like a person on the asexual spectrum.

Molly: And personally jug heads character does not exude a lot of what we traditionally think of as masculine energy. And so I think taking your like sort of less masculine loner soft boy character and making them a sexual is actually not my favorite idea because I think it sort of perpetuates the idea that like someone who literally self identifies as a weirdo is the one who's asexual like that makes me uncomfortable

Erin: So here's the thing about Jughead: When Riverdale was in development, show runners cast Cole Sprouse, the child actor and twin known for Disney's Suite Life of Zack and Cody, as Jughead. While preparing for his role, Cole realized that, in the most recent iteration of the Archie Comics, Jughead is canonically asexual. Eager to have this kind of representation on screen, Cole asks the producers if they'd consider an asexual Jughead. Teen Vogue even profiles Cole Sprouse as he

advocates for this portrayal of the character. But ultimately, Riverdale's writers say no to the idea of an explicitly asexual Jughead. But that doesn't mean Jughead's character as he is written now entirely misses the mark.

Molly: And something that I think about when I think about what Jughead means to me and represents for me is that I'm a person who's on the asexual spectrum and I have sex with people and I have relationships with people. And so, It's important to have representation from people who literally say that they're asexual but I don't think that every representation of a sexual people need to look like Todd from BoJack Horseman who doesn't have relationships who doesn't experience attraction ever and who literally like goes to asexual meet ups. That's an important representation but that's not all of our experience. And so Jughead is a teen who is in a relationship who's having sex with his girlfriend sometimes and none of that feels unrelatable to me.

Ariana: When you were having these very intense feelings about Jughead. Did you. You mentioned that you watched the show with your roommate. Did you mentioned this experience to your roommate.

Molly: I've only talked about it with a few people but every single time it's always been with queer and trans people and they've always been like screaming affirmation which was great because I literally had no idea and because I intentionally don't engage with this kind of stuff like I didn't know about the Auto Straddle Jughead Fashion Guide until I like said something in a tweet about Jughead fashion and you know someone linked me to it and I was like Oh this is like a discourse that everyone's having.

Ariana: I didn't talk about it with other people because I didn't know how it would be received one and I didn't really know how to explain the experience I was having. I was like wow I'm having this feeling.

Ariana: Because you and I share experiences of gender and sexuality that I think are really specific. And the fact that we're both kind of experiencing them in similar ways like I don't necessarily have other friends who fall into that exact intersection. So when we did talk about this experience of Jughead it was special for me because it felt like that very specific intersection of things all aligning and and.

Molly: I think that that something really magical about this show and the opportunities provided by this show right is like you and I Arianna like would not be having this conversation if not for Jughead. And so like I deeply deeply see myself in this character and you deeply deeply see yourself in this character and via the distributive property, We can understand that we actually like see a lot of ourselves and each other. But I don't know how easily you would have seen those same things in each other. If we had not had this opportunity to sort of triangulate them through this like ostensibly cis white male straight character.

Erin: The fact is there are other shows that are doing representation better than Riverdale. GLAAD praised Jane the Virgin, Crazy Ex Girlfriend and the Red Line for their representation of queerness. And queer people we spoke with for this episode are watching all kinds of new and exciting stuff--from shows like Pose and She Ra on Netflix to Charmed, another teen drama on the CW.

And Riverdale's sibling show - the Chilling Adventures of Sabrina has Theo, a trans boy, played by non-binary actor Lachlan Watson. And, because of this, Theo's character has a journey. A whole season passes before Theo fully realizes his gender. And, while this representation might also have its flaws, it's encouraging to see. There is a representation that wasn't there before. So instead of imagining a non-binary Jughead on Riverdale, we get to see Lachlan Watson draw from their own experiences as a non-binary person to create Theo. We get to see what happens when queer people are able to build the worlds they need to exist.

Unsurprisingly, in our search for queer representation in mainstream media, we've learned that no show or character is perfect. We are far too complicated a community to each be represented by anything that isn't made entirely by us--for us. But, in the meantime, we can dream. What we do find is something way better than the next binge-worthy show. We get to witness friendships forged and communities built--in real and digital space--where queer people find themselves and each other.

Big Thanks to our guests: Mars Williamson, Ashley Laidlaw, Janelle Yee, Ariana Martinez and Molly Woodstock for letting us record very personal conversations about pop culture. Special thanks to Andy Alseri for recording Mars and Ashley.

Queer Public is produced, Erin McGregor and edited and sound designed by Ariana Martinez.

We heard music from: Chris Zabriskie, SuperKnova, and Mise Darling. You can find links to all of the music you heard today in our show notes.

Our guest Molly is the host and creator of the amazing podcast Gender reveal -- It's so good. They just released their 50th episode and their entire catalogue is totally binge worthy. Head on over there to check it out.

Listeners: I am going to get real here for a second. We need donations to keep this show in production. We can't keep making it for free. So, If you love what we're doing, if you love queer public help us out. Maybe it's 1 dollar a month. Maybe if you are someone who holds access to wealth its \$10 a month. Maybe it's a one time donation of 25 or 50 dollars. Whatever it looks like for you, we need your help to grow our budget. Visit patreon.com/queerpublic to get access to lots of cool behind the scenes stuff and swag. Our next episode is our last episode for a while. But the sooner we hit some patreon goals the sooner you'll hear from us again.

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I'm your host, Erin McGregor. Thanks for listening.