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**CONTEMPORARY PROXIMITY FICTION. GUEST EDITED BY NADIA ALONSO**



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# INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY PROXIMITY FICTION

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NADIA ALONSO

The fiction series has been revealed to be an effective means of conveying – and possibly influencing – our sense of belonging to a group that shares at least a common language, set of cultural practices, climate and geographical space (Peris 2016: 127). Our proposed concept of “proximity series” thus refers to fiction produced by local networks with content related to a political-geographical-cultural reality that is generally smaller than a nation. In such series, the invariably close relationship of the story with the local reality is offered to the audience as a key element and main attraction, with the objective of conveying a particular set of cultural, social and political values (Fiske and Hartley 2003).

We could cite various examples of “proximity soap operas” that have demonstrated the success of this formula with audiences, such as *Nissaga de poder* and *Pobol y Cwm* (Moragas, Garitaonandía and López 1999: 19). The first of these, with 476 episodes broadcast between 1996 and 1998, was one of the most popular series on regional television in Catalonia; the second is a Welsh soap opera produced by BBC Wales beginning in 1974, which moved in 1982 to the Welsh channel S4C and continues to be in production today.

In these cases – and in others to be mentioned in this introduction and studied in this issue – language is a basic element of cultural proximity and a key to audience acceptance of the

series (Lacalle 2006; Peris 2015). The use of minority languages like Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Catalan or Flemish constitutes the element that most immediately and radically identifies the product with a particular region and community. For this reason, practically all proximity series are produced in regions with their own minority languages within the larger nations of which they form a part, with a strong linguistic identity of their own. One such region is Quebec, the only Canadian province with a French-speaking majority, where the most popular television products are locally produced and in French, as noted by Stéfany Boisvert in her article included in this issue. Chalmers and O'Donnell make the same observation in their contribution, noting that series produced in Irish or Scottish Gaelic represent a challenge to the status of English as the hegemonic international language *par excellence*.

In addition to language, there are characteristic features of local popular culture that facilitate the spectator's emotional engagement and empathy with the fictional universe through the recognition of experiences and events familiar to the local community. This emotionally charged connection is accentuated by the spectator's awareness that content so representative and defining of their local environment rarely appears on their country's television networks. The emotional value of proximity fiction may help to explain the popularity that many of these series enjoy. One example is a locally flavoured soap opera that was broadcast on Valencia's now-defunct regional station, Canal 9, from 2007 to 2013 (the year the station was shut down): *L'Alqueria Blanca* turned into a local phenomenon in the Valencian Community, on numerous occasions enjoying higher ratings than content on Spain's national networks (Peris 2015: 230). The series was filled with local references and strategies to elicit a sense of familiarity in spectators. The dialogue was mostly in Valencian, the local language that shares official status in the region with Castilian Spanish. The town that gives its name to the series was an iconic representation of the typical Valencian town (Peris 2015: 232) with its familiar places and customs reflecting regional traditions. The Valencian sports, locations, and all manner of regional symbols shown on the series evoke the literary tradition of *costumbrista* novelists like Vicente Blasco Ibáñez. At the same time, the storylines contain other highly stereotypical elements, such as family conflicts, land disputes, thwarted love, and the opposition between rich and poor, heroes and villains, all contextualized in the everyday life of rural Valencia in the 1960s.

Another obviously significant element of proximity fiction is the use of spaces that easily remind viewers of their

region. The town square with the church in the background in *L'Alqueria Blanca* references the main meeting place for locals in the towns of rural Valencia. Similarly, the fictitious Dutch town of Meerdijk, the setting for the longest-running and most famous soap opera in the Netherlands, *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden*, which combines all the features necessary for spectators to identify it with any number of towns in Holland. According to Peris (2016), landscapes, streets, buildings, or any other background may be used to orient the spectator's sense of familiarity in relation to the story. On numerous occasions, these spaces have historical significance, evoking the relatively recent past of the region in question. An example of this is the luxury hotel where wealthy Galician and Portuguese families spend their summer holidays in *Vidago Palace*, which is both the title and the main setting for the first proximity series co-produced by Galicia's regional television network in Spain and Portugal's national public broadcaster. On the other hand, the proximity effect can also be produced by showing contemporary spaces that are part of the everyday lives of both characters and audiences, as is the case in the Norwegian series *Skam*. This settings for this teen series are spaces in Oslo that are easily recognizable to the city's inhabitants, are linked to key moments in the development of the storylines.

We can thus conclude that proximity fiction triggers a geographical and communicative connection between the audience and its environment through television productions that are uniquely expressive of a language, a region, a history, and a set of shared popular traditions.

In view of the above, proximity fiction offers an opportunity for reflection on the apparent paradox that in a society technologically propelled towards globalization, contemporary media still hold serious possibilities of relating to audiences with elements from their immediate environment. This allows a space in which small channels can compete with the big media groups (Marzal and Casero 2009: 101) that dominate the audiovisual industry. And also related to this is the fact that major platforms with the biggest international distribution networks, like Netflix and HBO, have decided to take on productions at least with national if not local references.

Finally, technological advances and the possibility of accessing television content on different devices broaden the distribution options for these formats. An example of this is the proximity transmedia narrative, with experiences on Catalan public television in the form of the comic web series *Em dic Manel!*, in the Netherlands with the mobile app *Wie is Tim?* which follows a story based on a character from the

famous Dutch soap opera *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* or the aforementioned *Skam*, or *Vidago Palace*.

We can now access all kinds of online series from anywhere in the world at any time, a fact that inevitably raises a host of questions for a journal issue about the most local serial fiction possible. Is it possible today to defend audiovisual products that exhibit local elements (Dhoest 2013) in an effort to connect us to a community associated with a particular region, language and culture? Does it make sense for contemporary media, and specifically television, to engage in active policies promoting the cultural-linguistic reality of communities like the Welsh or Scottish in the United Kingdom, the Catalan, Basque or Galician in Spain, the Frisian in the Netherlands, the Breton or Corsican in France, the Gaelic community in Ireland or the French-speaking community in Quebec (Moragas, Garitaonandía and López 1999: 17)?

This issue will offer readers an overview which, although brief, may point towards some answers to these questions.

The article by Chalmers and O'Donnell presents an overview of the history of soap operas in minority languages like Irish or Scottish Gaelic, which are fighting for survival in a region whose hegemonic language is English. The authors offer a detailed analysis of the context of series production and distribution, with special attention to the circumstances that have made them emblematic examples of proximity fiction. This is the case of the well-known Scottish Gaelic soap opera *Machair*, which enjoyed great success in its first seasons due to the originality of the plotlines, becoming an iconic series for the Gaelic community. Another example is the Scottish series *River City*, which deals with the everyday lives of Scots free of the negative stereotypes that have historically characterized their depictions. These cases enrich the debate over the survival of proximity series, as they introduce contemporary social issues of importance to Scottish audiences.

For her part, Stéfany Boisvert examines proximity series in Quebec, Canada's only province with a French-speaking majority. Boisvert identifies and analyses the local elements present in two of the TV series with the biggest audiences in Quebec: *L'échappée* and *District 31*. The success of these regional French-language productions contradicts any suggestion that interest in local series has disappeared due to the extensive possibilities of access to national and international content offered by technology. On the contrary, as Boisvert argues, these domestic stories depict archetypes, cultural practices, social relations, norms, values and lifestyles that are perceived as familiar by their audiences. Moreover, the series' use of the French language, a feature that distinguishes

the inhabitants of Quebec from Canada's English-speaking majority, contributes decisively to their cultural specificity.

The third article in this special issue, by Jean Sébastien, analyses another Canadian series: the comedy *Mohawk Girls*. One of the points of greatest interest here is that this series was broadcast on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), which offers more than 40 hours a week of content in different indigenous languages. APTN is the first national public television station dedicated to Canada's indigenous population. Based on the documentary of the same name, the series addresses issues of race and attempts to challenge the racial and gender stereotypes that proliferate not only among members of non-Mohawk communities, but also within the community itself. Sébastien also explores the synergies established with the values of North America's "white" communities, in this case because the series is a sitcom featuring women that shares many elements in common with products like the US series *Sex and the City*. From this perspective, we can see how fiction productions targeting an indigenous community can display elements characteristic of that community, while at the same time claiming features representative of their integration into the contemporary mainstream.

We also feature two interviews that offer an interesting view of local television programming in Spain, a country with four co-official languages including Spanish, and 25 regional television networks with a wide range of local audiovisual productions, among which fiction series are especially prominent.

In the first interview, we talk to Javier Marzal, Chair of Audiovisual Communication, who offers an interesting exploration of the relationship between local television programming and politics. He also discusses the qualities of local television and its future in Spain in a context dominated by big media groups, and at a time when Valencia's public television station is going back on the air.

The second interview is with the screenwriter Rodolf Giner. He addresses issues related to local fiction series, including their distinctive features and the importance of language to such productions, whose main value lies in their ability to combine elements that are characteristic and identifiable for local audiences with more universal themes.

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# GOING NATIVE: LONG-RUNNING TELEVISION SERIALS IN THE UK

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## KEYWORDS

Soap opera; minority language; Welsh; Gaelic; Scots.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines in detail the development of the long-running serial in the UK, from its beginnings on radio in the 1940s, through the move to television in the mid 1950s and then up to the present day. It pays particular attention

to language use throughout this period, focusing on the move from Standard English to a wide range of regional dialects during the four decades when these serials were at the height of their popularity, routinely dominating the television ratings. It then examines the development of long-form serials in languages other than English, firstly Welsh from the mid 1970s on, and then Gaelic intermittently from the early 1990s to the present day, and finally Scots, a highly minoritised Germanic language spoken mostly in the Scottish Lowlands. It compares both the current health and the future prospects of Gaelic and Scots with a particular focus on the challenges faced by both. Additional insights into the particular case of Gaelic are provided via interviews with a number of stakeholders.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we provide a historical overview of television serials in the UK as a whole, showing in particular how the soap-opera landscape came to be dominated linguistically first by regional dialects of English, expanding later to accommodate geographically-bounded productions in Welsh, Gaelic and Scots. All the serials in this last group can be termed “minority-language” serials, in the sense that the languages they feature are used by a numerical minority of their respective populations. However, the languages they feature are in fact more correctly classified as “minoritised languages”, a term which applies to any language which is deliberately or even neglectfully deprived of resources for political or other reasons (Hornsby and Agarin 2012). To better understand the longitudinal processes which led to the emergence of these minoritised serials, we open with a discussion of the changing linguistic landscape of UK television serials since the mid-1950s. We show how the language of returning serials challenge the hegemony of London-based upper-class forms of speech, and discuss how minoritised-language serials – more specifically those produced in Scotland – can hope to survive in a broader UK linguistic landscape dominated by the international language *par excellence*, English (Mizumura 2017).

## 2. FROM MONOLINGUAL STANDARD TO MULTIDIALECTAL/MULTILINGUAL CULTURE

Until relatively recently, English – more precisely Standard English – was the *de facto* language of all public communication, including broadcast communication, in the UK. This mode of speech was itself part of a highly restricted communicative repertoire. In Fairclough’s terms on newscasting (rather than serials), it can be considered a form of “parochialism” (2001: 205), where phonology itself became an expression of power. Although other languages and dialects – including regional dialects of English – have always been spoken by communities of various sizes, it was not until the early 1960s that television serials began to appear which challenged the dominance of Standard English (also known as Received Pronunciation, or simply RP) on UK television (*Coronation Street*, ITV, 1960–; *Emmerdale*, ITV, 1972–; *Brookside*, Channel 4, 1982–2003; *EastEnders*, BBC, 1985–). Almost a further fifteen years would elapse before the first television serial appeared in a language other than English –

specifically Welsh (*Pobol y Cwm*, S4C, 1974–) – and the first serial in Gaelic (*Machair*, STV, 1993–1999) would not emerge until almost a further twenty years after that. To date, the one and only television serial featuring Scots, a Germanic language closely related to English and based mainly in the Scottish Lowlands, appeared in 2002.

Scots is by far the most minoritised of these languages. With only a very small number of exceptions, it is largely absent from the broader official public sphere (education, press, politics), and from official communication in general. As Smith (2000: 165) puts it, “While standardized written English subsequently became the educationally enforced (and fixed) norm, socio-political and cultural events meant Scots did not develop similarly”. Indeed, it has as yet no agreed orthographic rules (Kay 2006). There is considerable uncertainty over the number of speakers of Scots. The most recent UK census of 2011 suggested a figure of around 1.5 million, but this is almost certainly too low in view of the unreliability of much of the data gathered using questions which made little sense to many respondents; given the low official status afforded the language – few Scots are aware even of its modest elevation to “regional language” in 2001 (Spolsky 2004: 124) – a considerable number of its speakers do not recognise it as Scots, referring to it instead as a dialect or even as “slang”. On the basis of its own research, the University of Aberdeen’s Scots Leid Quorum cautiously suggested a figure of 2.7 million speakers (Murdoch 1996). Though it stressed that such figures required context and hedged them with many caveats, this overall conclusion would seem persuasive to anyone familiar with the linguistic situation of the Scottish Lowlands.

It is much easier to give (relatively) more reliable data in relation to Welsh and Gaelic, both of which enjoy a certain level of official recognition and standardisation. Welsh has just over half a million speakers out of a total population of just over 3 million, while Gaelic, which we return to below, has around 60,000 speakers out of a Scottish population of just over 5 million, in other words just over 1 per cent of the total. This represents a significant challenge in terms of the economics of broadcasting, although an increasing amount of more recent research has aimed to isolate the extent to which the language can be understood as a general business asset (HIE 2014) and as an important economic aspect of cultural and media production in Scotland’s Central Belt (Chalmers and Danson 2009). The largest Gaelic-speaking communities – and therefore the largest potential audiences for Gaelic-language serials – are to be found in the Western Isles of northern Scotland (officially known for local government

purposes by their Gaelic name *Na h-Eileanan Siar*), particularly in the landmass of Lewis and Harris, though there are also sizeable diasporic groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In terms of the production of official Language Acts or Plans and similar political-cultural initiatives, Gaelic and Welsh have been treated very differently from Scots. Welsh was the first beneficiary of a Language Act in 1967 while the first Gaelic Language Act was not published until 2005. No such plan has ever been developed for Scots.

The importance of formal recognition of this kind cannot be underestimated in terms of its knock-on effect on broader cultural production, including television serial production (Shohamy 2006: 62). A striking example of broader cultural impact of such initiatives is the case of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland. Irish – a Celtic language closely related to Gaelic and with a broadly similar level of penetration at between 1 and 2 per cent of the population – has since the founding of the Republic in 1916 always been much better resourced than its close Scottish cousin: it has since 1916 been officially the first national language of the Republic (English is its second official language) and as a result enjoys a range of advantages which attach to such a status, including the creation of the Irish-language television channel TG4 in 1996. The Irish-language television serial *Ros na Rún* started on the first Irish public-service channel RTÉ1 in the early nineties, and later moved to TG4 in September 1996. In its new location it has aired two episodes per week from September to May ever since, having now exceeded 1600 episodes in total. This is a level of official support that Gaelic-language television output in Scotland could only dream of.

### 3. RETURNING SERIAL DRAMA IN THE UK

#### 3.1 English-Language Serials: from Aristocratic Accents to the Irruption of the Local

The continuous long-running serial drama – now widely and popularly referred to in the English-speaking world as the “soap opera” or “soap” – was one the great staples of UK broadcast output in the first half of the twentieth century (O'Donnell 1999). This format first emerged in the UK (somewhat later than in the USA) on radio, to be joined shortly thereafter (but not replaced) by televised offerings. The pioneering radio soap, the BBC's *Mrs Dale's Diary*, ran every weekday afternoon from 5 January 1948 until 25 April 1969, clocking up more than 5000 episodes and firmly establishing

the returning serial as a viable broadcast form. The second, also a BBC production (radio was a BBC monopoly at the time), was titled *The Archers*. It began formally on 1 January 1951 (having broadcast five pilot episodes in the previous year) and continues to the present day. With its current total of over 18,500 episodes, it is the longest still-running broadcast serial of all time. Both of these productions had (and, in the case of *The Archers*, still has) a rural setting, something of a conundrum given that by the late-1940 to the mid-1950s, the UK was one of the most industrialised societies on earth. We return to the question of location below.

The first television soap opera was the BBC offering *The Grove Family*, launched on 2 April 1954. This was clearly a pre-emptive response by the BBC to the British parliament having passed the Television Act of that year, a piece of legislation which paved the way for the arrival of commercial television in the UK in 1955. This pattern of public-service channels launching television serials in response to the imminent arrival of new commercial channels would be one which would repeat throughout continental Europe in the 1990s (O'Donnell 1999) as a result of the liberalisation of television taking place at the time. It goes without saying that a television soap is a much more complex – not to mention more costly – undertaking than any radio version: for example, in terms of age, actors must credibly resemble the characters they are playing; wardrobe must likewise be in keeping with elements such as social status or occupation; and the fictional world must be physically created before the camera. There were also severe constraints imposed by the requirements of live broadcasting, the only option available given the technology of the time. Under these circumstances, five-day-a-week serials were simply out of the question. During its short three-year life (9 April 1954–28 June 1957) *The Grove Family* totalled 147 episodes, filmed in the Lime Grove Studios from which it took its name.

If location was a prime conundrum in *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *The Archers*, such dissonances in *The Grove Family* were also manifest in the way the characters spoke. Like early television throughout Europe, the UK lacked any kind of established cadre of actors familiar with the requirements of the new medium: the most obvious place to look for the required talent was almost always the theatre, with a very different history often closely related to national or international “classics” such as Shakespeare in the UK and elsewhere (for the case of France see Bourdon 2011), and a different understanding of what constituted appropriate diction (for a similar reliance on the Classics in the recently democratised Spain of the late

1970s see Gubern et al. 2000: 374–5). The result often bordered on unintentional comedy as when, for example, a cast member playing the part of a policeman – not widely known in the UK for their polished educated accents – would speak with a plummy Home Counties accent as if he were indeed a Shakespearian actor (the so-called “Home Counties” are those surrounding London). When speaking of Val Gielgud in 1992, Michael Barry – BBC Head of Productions in the 1930s and 40s – had this to say:

he appeared remote from our everyday, working lives ... There was, for example, his refusal to accept *Mrs Dale's Diary*, the long-running and popular radio serial as a worthy part of a drama schedule ... Serials had not as yet found a place in television programmes... (Barry 1992: 134).

But this was also part of the class atmosphere oozing from *The Grove Family*, the links between class and language being now a structural element of UK English-language soaps in general.

The first soap opera broadcast by the commercial Independent Television network (by then five years-old) was *Coronation Street*, which has run from 1960 to the present day, having now exceeded 9300 episodes. It marked the beginning in the UK of the now permanent relationship between commercial broadcasting, serial television drama and advertising, a relationship which had been cemented earlier in the field of radio in the USA in the 1930s (Sivulka 1998: 220). *Coronation Street*, which would break forever the rural and rather comfortable middle-class mould of *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *The Archers*, elevating the industrial and cultural prominence of the continuous serial, would dominate British serial drama in terms of ratings until well into the current twenty-first century. The contrasts with the previous regime were striking. “The British,” as Peris points out, “have long grasped that one cannot set all fiction series in London” (2018: 38), and indeed all the characters in *Coronation Street* not only came from the Greater Manchester area in the North of England (Dyer et al. 1981), they also spoke with instantly recognisable Mancunian accents – a clear signifier of working-class status in the UK's complex ideological mapping of accents and dialects. Major productions since then have featured the working-class Cockney dialect of London (*EastEnders*, 1985–, >5600 episodes), rural Yorkshire dialects (*Emmerdale Farm*, later shortened to *Emmerdale* to lessen the potentially negative effects of overweening rurality,

1972–, >8000 episodes), and the working-class Scouse dialect of Liverpool (*Brookside*, 1982–2003, 2915 episodes). The Channel 4 teen soap *Hollyoaks* (1995–, >4700 episodes) started off using only Standard English but quickly diversified and for many years now has featured a range of regional accents.

Scotland's contribution to English-language serial drama has been modest (O'Donnell 2007; Castelló and O'Donnell 2009). *Garnock Way* (1976–9, >300 episodes), produced by the commercial channel Scottish Television (STV) and set in a small working-class town midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, was unceremoniously cancelled when the channel won the commission for a new serial with a wider reach, covering Scotland and parts of England. The ease with which this production was cancelled suggests that, in addition to “minoritised languages”, there may be grounds for talking also of “minoritised serials”, something to which we also return below. The “replacement” serial was *Take the High Road* (1980–2003, 1517 episodes, changing its name to *High Road* in 1993), a rural soap set in a small village on the highly picturesque banks of Loch Lomond, on the very edge of the Scottish Highlands; as Dunn puts it (2011: 3), it was “set firmly in a picture postcard Scottish world of mountain, loch and shortbread tin”. The language of this soap was English (with a mild Scottish accent) though Scots did make a brief appearance when the serial was in its death throes, and even then it was spoken by only one character (played by a well-known Scottish comedian).

### 3.2 Returning Drama Serials in Languages other than English

We will deal with these chronologically on the basis of when they were first broadcast. Wales has had its own Welsh-language soap opera since 1974. *Pobol y Cwm* (People of the Valley, >7000 episodes) (Griffiths 1995) was produced by the BBC and originally aired on BBC Wales, and is now the longest-running BBC television drama ever. In 1984, the program was moved to the newly launched public-service Welsh-language channel S4C, nine years before the passing of the Welsh Language Act, which stated that Welsh was to be treated “on a basis of equality” with English in the public sector and in its use in the legal system of Wales (Welsh Language Act 1993, section 5(2)). Moving the program to a Welsh-language channel, then, was one of an increasing number of signs indicating awareness of the UK not as a homogeneous monolingual polity, but as a somehow stitched-together “confected nation state” (Black 2013: 166). *Pobol y Cwm*

will shortly celebrate its forty-fifth birthday, and its even longer-term future appears comfortably assured.

The first Gaelic-language long-running serial was titled *Machair*, a term used to designate a kind of sandy grassland found in the dunes of western Scotland and north-west Ireland. It emerged into a less than welcoming linguistic environment, given the near total absence of Gaelic from the written press and its relatively poor levels of penetration on radio, albeit that a study by West and Graham (2011) indicated that 10% of the Scottish population came into contact with the Gaelic language via the radio. Launched on 6 January 1993, it was produced by STV and ran once a week on a seasonal basis, initially thirteen and later twenty-six episodes per season, until March 1999, clocking up a total of 151 episodes. While figures such as these are small beer compared to the gargantuan totals racked up by *The Archers* or *Coronation Street*, for example, they demonstrate two important things: (1) high-risk cultural innovation on television is not necessarily the prerogative of public-service models, even when the financial viability of the project is by no means assured; and (2) in the world of politics small groupings which can respond to a highly localised but clearly defined need can on occasion, given a favourable political conjuncture, achieve otherwise unexpected results.

The emergence of *Machair* was indeed the ultimate result of a political rather than an economic or even primarily cultural manoeuvre which came in the first instance not from within Scotland, but from London, a metropolitan centre which normally sees Scotland as peripheral and the Scottish Gaelic-speaking community as a kind of “periphery in a periphery” (Dunn 2015: 1). In December 1989, however, in an attempt to woo the votes of the electors of the Western Isles, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, no friend at the time either of Scotland or of regional/local identities more generally, made a surprising move. Responding to “a strong Gaelic lobby which had brought considerable pressure on a Thatcherite government striving to regain lost ground in Scotland” (Dunn 2011: 4), she announced the allocation of £8 million (later increased to £9.5 million) within the framework of its forthcoming Broadcasting Act to set up a Gaelic Television Fund. The aim of the fund would be to increase the amount of Gaelic-language television in Scotland from 100 to 300 hours per year, starting in 1993. When STV presented an unopposed bid for the renewal of its ITV franchise in 1991, this proposal contained a commitment to produce 200 hours of Gaelic-language programming, including a soap opera. *Machair*, an expensive production costing around £77,000 per episode, was the concrete result of that commitment and

the funders spent one-third of the entire available budget on its first season. It was shot initially entirely on location on the island of Lewis, though interiors were later shot at the new Media Centre in the island’s capital, Stornoway, and training needs – which were significant given the very small acting pool available – were met by the professional crew who also doubled as mentors and coaches. The local Gaelic speakers even attended story conferences and translated the original English-language scripts into Gaelic (Holmes 2009: 81). The original conception had been that Peter May and Janice Hally – both well-known Scottish scriptwriters with experience of writing *Take the High Road* amongst other credits – would mentor, monitor and help the work of emerging Gaelic scriptwriters, allowing them to benefit from their own tried and tested experience. In the event, the leap into high quality scriptwriting was initially a step too far for the Gaelic trainees; May and Hally became the principal scriptwriters for series 1, being joined by another seasoned scriptwriter, Anne Marie di Mambro, for series 2.

It would be fair to say that there was a certain amount of scepticism in at least some sections of the Scottish press more generally about the arrival of this Gaelic soap: indeed, some journalists referred to it dismissively as “Gaeldorado”, an openly sneering reference to the BBC’s failed 1993–4 UK soap *Eldorado*. Anecdotal reports also suggest that one scriptwriter (other than those mentioned here) indicated that they did not see the relevance of Gaelic in the modern world, but if the language was to be saved “then there was no better vehicle for this than through the creation of a popular soap”. In the event, the audience pull of *Machair* surpassed all expectations. Average audiences for the first season were 451,000, while the second episode was watched by no fewer than 516,000 viewers – almost eight times more people than there are Gaelic speakers in the country. It averaged a 28 per cent audience share in the Grampian area in the north of Scotland (with 40 per cent for the final episode of the first season) and 20 per cent in central Scotland: very healthy – indeed in some senses quite remarkable – figures given the general dislike of subtitled programmes in Scotland and the UK as a whole. *Machair* was deliberately presented as not just being relevant to Gaelic speakers – as an advertisement for the programme in the *Glasgow Herald* put it: “Adultery, loneliness, revenge. Some things do translate. *Machair*, 7.30 tonight, on Scottish” (7 January 1994).

In its first season, *Machair* was by any standards the most successful Gaelic-language programme ever to be screened in Scotland, despite some perhaps inevitable community

criticism of the standard or dialects of Gaelic heard from a number of on-screen characters. (A well-known Gaelic poet referred to some of the dialogue as being “teenage Skye Gaelic”, although this was probably unfair as some of those concerned were actually playing the characters of Gaelic learners). As might be expected, these large television viewing figures caused great euphoria among Gaelic-language activists, particularly those working in television. As Rhoda Macdonald, Head of Gaelic Programmes at Scottish (the former STV), put it in 1993: “Drama is the most popular form of television and it has a spectral appeal. People aged 5 or 85 will watch drama. ‘Machair’ makes Gaelic viable” (Macdonald 1993: 13). Despite these extraordinary viewing figures and the accompanying euphoria, however, *Machair* was unable to maintain its appeal. By the end of the 1996 season its viewing figures had fallen to 165,000, around one-third of its viewers three years earlier. Survival seemed increasingly unlikely, and with continued funding increasingly difficult to justify on economic grounds, its status moved from “minority-language” to “minoritised” serial. It limped on for another three years with steadily declining viewing figures before simply petering out in March 1999.

More recently, Scots has featured along with Scottish Standard English in BBC Scotland’s *River City* (2002, >1050 episodes). This production originally went out as two half-hour episodes per week, though this was later changed to a single weekly one-hour episode when competition for desirable timeslots with the long-established soaps became too intense – yet another example of “minoritisation”. *River City* represents a radical departure from previous patterns where Scots, to the extent that it has been present in the media at all, has been largely confined to the area of comedy – the niche role filled earlier by comedian Andy Cameron in *High Road*. *River City*, by contrast, takes Scots seriously, treating it as the language of everyday life that it is for many if not most Lowland Scots. The series avoids the disparaging stereotypes to which Scots has historically been subjected, particularly among the educated classes, while also acknowledging that it shares this linguistic space with the more politically dominant English.

The official English title of the second Gaelic-language soap to be produced so far – official in the sense that this is the one used by the producers in their advertising – is “The Ties That Bind”. A more literal translation would be simply “bonds”, though it is clear from a number of conversations in the narrative involving different characters that the kinds of bonds being referred to are indeed primarily, per-

haps even exclusively, familial. *Bannan* is produced by BBC ALBA, which is a co-managed partnership between the BBC Gaelic service (BBC Alba) and MG Alba (Meadhanan Gàidhlig Alba, literally Gaelic Media Scotland), the operating name of the Gaelic Media Service whose official remit under the Communications Act 2003 is to ensure that a wide and diverse range of high-quality Gaelic programmes is made available to persons in Scotland. (The preferred Gaelic translation of MG Alba had originally been *Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig* (The Gaelic Media Service), however this proved a problem given that its acronym SMG would have clashed at the time with that of Scottish Television’s parent body SMG, the Scottish Media Group).

Twenty-three episodes have been aired so far, consisting of a three-episode pilot followed by four series of five episodes each, covering the four-and-a-half-year period from 23 September 2014 to the present day, and – unlike *Machair* – the entire scriptwriting process, including story conferences and all communication within and with the crew, is in Gaelic. The benefits of an all-Gaelic or predominantly Gaelic team of camera and technical workers has previously been remarked on by other Gaelic TV directors (MacDonald 2015), and this was seen by *Bannan* director Mairead Hamilton, in her conversation with us, as advantageous within the programme’s present structure, allowing for the development of a more authentic dynamism in the production. It also nullified the key points of criticism made by McLeod (2002) and others regarding the then artificial “Potemkin Village” aspect of some Gaelic cultural and business models, whereby would-be “Gaelic” productions were put together using English means. Needless to say, however, twenty-three episodes over such a long period is a glacial rate of advance compared to mainstream British soaps, and even to *Machair*, something which clearly impacts negatively on the overall pace and energy of the serial.

## 4. REPRESENTING SCOTLAND IN TELEVISION SERIALS

### 4.1 Human and Linguistic Geographies

Rather than being purely geographical, peripheries are largely relational in nature: my centre can easily be your periphery, and the same location can just as easily fulfil both functions at the same time. The only senses in which *River City* might credibly be described as occupying a peripheral position in broader Scottish culture are its rather unattractive

scheduling – particularly compared to the English-language UK soaps, broadcast in Scotland at the same time as elsewhere in the UK and enjoying rather larger audiences than *River City* – and in the minoritised status of Scots itself. Otherwise this serial presents itself as fully engaged with the linguistic and other complexities of the dramatic situations it develops which it treats without fear or favour. The Scotland presented in *River City* is located in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, well-known landmarks of which appear at the beginning of each episode. The physical environment provided by the purpose-built set in Dumbarton (south west of Glasgow) stresses, with its tenements and local shops, the general working-classness of the locale, always bearing in mind that working-classness in British soaps – and indeed in soap operas more generally – is a complex trade-off between, in Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu 1992), unimpressive levels of economic/cultural capital and middle-to-lower-middle-class positions occupied mainly by small-business people (truly proletarian characters are an extreme rarity). But the main marker of working-classness – from a middle-class point of view also a peripheral identity in terms of social capital – is beyond any doubt the taken-for-granted and cringe-free use of Scots.

*River City* has from the outset been multi-ethnic in its casting, deliberately trying to reflect the reality of twenty-first century Scotland. Characters of Indian or Pakistani origin were present from the start (i.e. from episode 1), there have been characters of Chinese or more recently Polish origin, nationalities that are now a visible element of the Scottish population. There was also for a while a Gaelic-speaking character, who would on very rare occasions share brief conversations in Gaelic with fellow Gaels passing through (though never central to) the narrative. However tokenistic, *River City*'s nod in the direction of Gaelic has never been reciprocated by *Bannan*, which – though on rare occasions featuring brief exchanges in English – has yet to feature but the most cursory exchanges in Scots.

The Gaelic-language soaps are, needless to say, in a very different situation altogether. Gaelic is by far the dominant language in *Machair* and *Bannan*, though rather less comprehensively in the former where a certain amount of English was heard in most episodes, usually spoken by monolingual English speakers; an upside of this approach was that it made it possible for quite high-profile actors to appear in the serial even though they had no linguistic competence in Gaelic whatsoever. *Bannan*'s more thorough-going policy on this issue has ruled-out this level of English use, and occasions where it is used – mostly in Edinburgh or “Glasgow-near” settings

– are few indeed. The production is “conceived, written and directed in Gaelic” with even all trainee directors needing to be fluent. The most striking example of this policy in action was when the American character Nevada appeared in ten episodes in 2015–16. Although the American actress concerned (Annie Griffin) had no competence in Gaelic whatsoever, a coach was hired to teach her to say her lines in what eventually proved to be a very acceptable Gaelic indeed (albeit with a recognisable American accent). Both productions also make use of a range of dialectical terms, which can vary notably from one island to another: decisions on which form is the most appropriate in any given context are taken in close consultation with the cast. In addition, the occasional loan word is brought in when the corresponding Gaelic word would not be one in common usage – such as the English word “lottery” (success or non-success in which is a not uncommon theme in soaps).

#### 4.3 Discourses of Scottishness

In a highly influential essay, McArthur (1982) postulated three discourses which had dominated representations of Scotland for over a century: Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesidism. Tartanry resurrects a lost past of tartan-clad Highland warriors traversing rugged and intimidating landscapes across unforgiving terrain. Well-known cinematic examples would include *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* (1995 both). Less heroic and even kitsch examples also abound – kitsch being understood here in Eco's sense of “aiming at the sale of *pre-packaged effects*” (1964: 72) – particularly in the tourist industry where visitors are encouraged to buy biscuit tins featuring pipers, lochs and so on, very much the visual (though not necessarily social) terrain of *High Road*. Kailyard, whose name derives from a late-nineteenth-century literary movement, depicts Scotland as a country of small rural communities where everyone knew everyone else's business and the lower classes kowtowed to the local clergy, businessmen and even the occasional minor noble. Clydesidism derived from the industrial heartlands of the River Clyde, and was dominated by shipyard workers and miners with their highly masculine culture. A more recent variation – sometimes known as post-Clydesidism – offers a rather watered-down working-class feel and noticeably softened sexual politics: it is visible in a highly attenuated form in *River City* (O'Donnell 2007).

The dominance of these discourses poses significant problems for a “workable” representation of the Western Isles, “workable” in the sense that the native inhabitants might recognise themselves in them. Clydesidism, however “light”,

is simply not an option given the lack of any significant industrial infrastructure in a region dominated by crofting and small-scale local enterprises of various kinds. The flat and uninspiring landscapes of the Hebrides lack the grandeur of the northern Scottish mainland, and any heroic representation would be rejected by locals who lost any kind of control over their land and culture – including their language – after the calamitous defeat of the Battle of Culloden in 1745 and the Highland Clearances of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, which decimated the Gaelic-speaking population. Only Kailyard, with its low-key close-community feel, appears to offer any potential, but this is made difficult by the fact the Western Isles are characterised by widely dispersed dwellings with relatively few opportunities for collective identity formation.

To date, neither *Bannan* nor *Machair* before it has entirely succeeded in developing a truly workable alternative discourse. Both serials feature genuinely Highland settings, being filmed in Stornoway and the Isle of Skye respectively (though both are set in the Outer Hebrides), and outdoor shooting is common in both, but these locations, differing strongly from both the Scottish Lowland and the mainland Highlands and lacking an identifiable discursive frame, become as a result the key semiotic marker of the Western Isles as an “elsewhere”, with frequent shots of windswept empty beaches under leaden skies or brooding clouds, isolated farmhouses or long shots of cars making their way along windswept winding roads. All of this has echoes of the rather regressive discourse of the “Celtic twilight” (Chapman 1978), the term deriving originally from a book of poetry by Yeats but now more commonly used to present the islands in particular as isolated and lost in the half-light, staring out to sea rather than back to civilisation. Musically this has also been represented in the past in what has become known as the “lone sheiling complex” (McArthur 2003: 59), where romanticised Gaelic songs (such as the *Canadian Boat Song*, recorded by D. M. Moir in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) nostalgically harked back to when Gaelic-speaking families would spend summers in small sheilings – bothy-like huts with few if any amenities – which allowed sheep to be monitored while in pasture. These visual tropes have been used again recently to represent the remoteness of the Shetland Islands off the north-west of Scotland as depicted in the popular detective drama *Shetland* (2013–). In fact, these scenes exude what is now known in the UK as a strong “Scandy” (i.e. Scandinavian) feel, familiar to viewers as a result of the unprecedented popularity of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish series in recent years. As

*Bannan*'s producer Chris Young said during the Edinburgh International Film Festival after a screening of the pilot in 2014, “It seemed to go down very well. We want to emulate the success of the Scandinavians”, adding immediately afterwards “although it is nothing like *The Killing*, *Borgen* or *The Bridge*” (Jew, n/d). As we shall see later, despite its many qualities, *Bannan* does not seem likely at the moment to tackle anything as hard-hitting as the Scandinavian dramas, or even as the long-running UK soaps, although issues such as racism and murder have more recently reared their heads, giving the series a “darker” feel than it previously had.

## 5. NARRATING THE LOCAL

In a wide-ranging review of European soap operas, O'Donnell (1999) theorised three levels of narrative which can be found in any returning serial drama: (1) the micronarrative – the level of small-scale, highly localised personal or business relationships; (2) the metanarrative – the level of what might broadly be called “current affairs”, where scriptwriters constantly bring in issues from ongoing public debate, often combining these with elements from the micronarrative; and (3) the macronarrative – where the moral values defended by the soap at the levels of both the micro and the metanarrative merge to create the overarching moral universe offered to the viewers. Though the macronarrative is the most abstract of the three levels, O'Donnell (1999) argues that this is where the success of the production stands or falls. This is the level at which the soap keeps both itself and its viewers “up-to-date”, and producers and scriptwriters are constantly monitoring the media in all its forms (now including social media) in order to identify the pressure points of public debate. When a sufficient level of pressure is reached, these issues are drawn into the soap, often tracking very substantial societal changes including in recent years in attitudes to homosexuality, euthanasia, same-sex marriage and others. It is in the metanarrative, in giving greater breadth and depth to the micronarrative and framing the overall ethical force of the serial as a whole over time, that the “centre” of any such production is to be found. Metanarratives, as a result, require considerable nurturing and care.

*Pobol y Cwm*, with its dependable funding source, large talent pool and even larger surrounding Welsh-speaking population, has had no difficulty finding and maintaining such a centre, to which its more than forty years on air amply testify. But not all soaps have been so lucky, well-resourced or imaginatively crafted. If they fail to keep up with social



change they will become dated and even irrelevant and will eventually fail. *High Road* was a vividly illustrative example of such a process. In a country undergoing rapid change as a result primarily of globalisation and the advancing neoliberal economic hegemony in the eighties and nineties, the series' combination "of romantic Highland scenery and of gossipy rural parochialism" (Dunn 2011: 2) lost all power of attraction. A last ditch attempt to save it through a rapid and ill-thought-out toughening of its metanarrative (including the sudden appearance from nowhere of a local secondary school with all its associated problems of truancy, bullying and even drugs) failed to pull it through. *River City*, though, set in an urban environment with an endless supply of such material, has so far had little difficulty meeting this challenge. *Machair* suffered a somewhat similar (though not identical fate) to *High Road*, not helped by the difficulty in renewing the Gaelic-speaking acting pool to keep up with generational change.

*Bannan's* challenges in this respect seem many; in written correspondence with us, *Machair* scriptwriter David Dunn took a decidedly gloomy view of the programme's prospects. Rather than looking forward or breaking new ground, his judgement was that:

it a) relied on the trope of the returning Gael, b) was sluggishly directed and acted with no greater competence or confidence, c) didn't significantly benefit from the move to Skye which simply produced a more generalised West Highland rather than Island setting. I lost interest thereafter so can't comment on how it has developed.

Given that, for the reasons mentioned above, Tartanry and Clydesidism are no longer viable representational strategies, the only option left – the one to some extent adopted by *River City* – may be some updated version of Kailyard, complete with laptops, social media and so on, but with a less physically tightly-knit community, perhaps even mobilising social media to overcome its spatial dispersion and develop a properly functioning metanarrative. But it is precisely a functioning metanarrative which is lacking at the moment. Its highly dispersed characters, lacking a geographical centre of gravity or even a common dialect, struggle to form any kind of identifiable common core with a shared simultaneous time frame. In this respect we could usefully compare *Bannan's* recent 2017 rape storyline with the famous rape storyline in *Brookside* in 1986. While *Bannan's* storyline was of a historic rape – it had happened several years earlier – where the iden-

tity of the rapist was slowly stumbled upon after a number of false trails, giving the story more of a "whodunnit" feel rather than being an exploration of gender violence, the *Brookside* rape happened in the immediate past, and the victim's wordless anguish and desperation were shown by her sobbing attempts to wash herself clean in the shower in a scene which older viewers remember to this very day.

When we raised this issue of the metanarrative with Mairead Hamilton, her answer was that the moral framework aimed at by the producers was "caring", one which could provide a both human and narrative "glue" for the dispersed island communities within a narrative which was itself of necessity stretched out due to limited funding available. This was an entirely coherent response. She drew our attention to the strong female-driven narratives and the female characters around which many of the storylines revolved, from the "matriarch" Peggi (apparently one of the most popular characters in the soap) to one of the younger characters Màiri – "a matriarch in the making". This she put down to the strong female scriptwriters now creating the plots. She was also pleased that the stability given by the recently announced funding deal would allow further development of the individual characters over the longer term (she cited the emerging racist nature of one). In terms of making itself relevant to younger members of the Gaelic community, she believed that the soap was on the "cusp of something exciting", but as it went forward it was important to draw on interactions with young Gaels through social media, citing the Norwegian production *Skam* (2015, 43 episodes) as a possible inspiration to examine. *Skam* is a web-based teen-oriented television drama series where new clips, conversations or social media posts are published online as the series is aired, thus allowing a contemporary connection with young Norwegians globally. Referring to the use of social media generally, she commented that the hashtag #*bannan* had received the most reactions ever on twitter with its storyline about the murder.

She also provided a convincing rationale for the serial's rather unconventional opening. While most soap operas start "in medias res", *Bannan* opened with a clear reversal of classic folk-tale structure (Propp 1968) which typically begins with the "hero" leaving home in response to the "call to adventure" (Campbell 2008: 41-8), returning later in victorious mode. *Bannan*, however, opens deliberately in the mode of failure, with Màiri returning defeated from her time on the mainland, only to slowly discover the caring environment awaiting her in Lewis. In some ways this unconventional opening and narrative strategy is a daring move, and certainly deserving of

support, but whether or not *Bannan* will have the narrative and other resources necessary to breathe both life and audience-gripping energy into this as-yet embryonic and intermittent community remains at this point an open question.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The “multichannel society” (Lundby and Futsæter 1993) is now firmly established, and we appear to be moving ever more rapidly towards “spreadable media” (Jenkins et al. 2013) – media formats which can be adapted to almost any cultural environment, of which the most striking example to date is surely the many adaptations of *Ugly Betty*, including a Hindi version complete with Bollywood-style song and dance routines (McCabe and Akass 2013). In this context, the future of the long-running UK television serial does not look particularly rosy. While *Coronation Street* is usually still among the most viewed programmes of any week in the UK (mostly around position four or five) with roughly 8.5 million viewers, it is now heavily out-gunned by shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (around 8.5 million) or even on occasions by documentaries such as *Blue Planet* with just under 13.5 million, and peak audiences have fallen from over 30 million in the 1980s to around 8 million today (November 2017 figures from <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/weekly-top-30/>). By contrast, the overall viewing figures for the BBC ALBA channel have in general well surpassed the original projections, which were set by the BBC Trust in 2011 to be at least 250,000 people on a weekly basis. According to audience research by TNS-BRMB, overall viewing figures over the past three years were in excess of 600,000 viewers with a mid-2013 peak at 780,000 viewers. According to BBC ALBA figures, this represents 15% of the Scottish audience over 16 years of age. Indeed, Ofcom’s annual reports on BBC ALBA over a six year period from 2008 to 2014 indicated that audiences, when asked whether BBC ALBA was a worthwhile thing for the BBC to be spending the licence fee on, answered positively, with between 41% and 66% of respondents agreeing with this statement with a Likert-scale score of 8, 9 or 10, 10 indicating “strongly agree” (Ofcom 2014).

Is it possible for minority-language serials such as the ones examined here to survive in a context of the diminishing economic returns outlined above, even if the cultural returns may be appreciable? The answer can at best be a tentative yes, but inevitably at the cost of sacrifices of all kinds. *River City* has survived partly by shifting from a two-ep-

isode-per-week pattern to a longer single episode per-week, a tactic which avoids unwinnable clashes with much stronger competition but results in a more fragmented and discontinuous narrative. Despite the original euphoria, *Machair* could not sustain its original narrative vigour and as a result moved to ever less advantageous positions in the schedules before disappearing altogether – a fate suffered by numerous European soaps in the late nineties and later. The news that *Bannan* has now been “green-lit” until 2020 gives room for hope: speaking in June of this year, Chris Young, head of the company producing *Bannan*, accepted that production had been somewhat “ad-hoc” to date due to the lack of a long-term commitment”, but suggested that the new infusion of money would allow “more risks” to be taken (*The Scotsman*, 20 June 2017). Investigations of social media interaction and the lessons of on-line productions may also be of some help. But as Umberto Eco argued many decades ago, the success of television serials does not lie in the (inevitably) repetitive nature of what he calls “the contents of the message”, with their recurrent combinations of the old and new, but in the way “in which the message transmits those contents” (1985: 135 – his italics). Shrewdly selected and imaginatively narrated risks may well provide *Bannan* with a creative (rather than a geographical) edge which it has lacked so far. As stated earlier, in our view the path to this level of creative engagement must lie in the metanarrative. A greater and more lively engagement with debates relevant not only to those living on the islands, but also to Scots more generally, whether Gaelic-speaking or not, offers the best hope for survival.

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## FILMS

- Rob Roy* (1995)  
*Braveheart* (1995)

## RADIO SERIALS

- Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948-1969)  
*The Archers* (1950-)

## TELEVISION SERIALS

- Bannan* (2014-)  
*Borgen* (2010-2013)  
*Brookside* (1982–2003)  
*Coronation Street* (1960-)  
*EastEnders* (1985-)  
*Eldorado* (1993-1994)  
*Emmerdale* (1972-)  
*Garnock Way* (1976-1979)  
*High Road* (1980–2003)  
*Hollyoaks* (1995-)  
*Machair* (1993-1999)  
*Pobol y Cwm* (1974-)  
*River City* (2002-)  
*Skam* (2015-)  
*The Bridge* (2011-)  
*The Grove Family* (1954-1957)  
*The Killing* (2011-2014)  
*Ugly Betty* (2006-2010)

# AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE SURVIVAL OF QUEBEC'S TÉLÉROMANS AS PROXIMITY SERIES

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## ABSTRACT

Quebec is a prime example of a province with a strong attachment to proximity series. Top-rated TV shows in Quebec are almost always of local provenance, and some productions even set world records for market penetration. Moreover, many long-running serialized dramas called *téléromans* still garner some of the highest ratings in the province. And yet, almost nothing has been written about these contemporary *téléromans*, since most studies

now focus on shorter high-budget TV series—the most legitimated fictions that may appeal to global audiences. In this paper, I provide a textual analysis of *L'échappée* (TVA, 2016-) and *District 31* (Ici Radio-Canada Télé, 2016-), two TV serials that attract some of the highest ratings every week. I shall determine the themes and “local elements” (Dhoest 2013) that may have contributed to their success with local audiences. The pervasive popularity of *téléromans* in Quebec seems to contradict—or, at the very least, complicate—the general assumption that due to the transnational circulation and digitization of “high end” TV dramas (Nelson 2007), people have lost interest in local/regional productions, and that TV series have therefore ceased to foster local/national forms of identification in smaller communities.

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Studies have shown that TV viewers usually prefer domestic fictions, mostly because they represent archetypes, cultural practices, social relations, norms, values, locations and lifestyles that are perceived as familiar (Straubhaar 2007, 2010), and that may therefore promote a form of everyday/banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Castelló *et al.* 2009; Dhoest 2013; Boisvert forthcoming). This finding undeniably applies to Quebec, the only Canadian province with a majority Francophone population. Quebec may indeed be considered one of the most telling examples of an attachment to proximity television. The popularity of local TV programs in this province is almost without parallel; while top-rated TV shows in English Canada are usually US programs, in Quebec, they are almost invariably of local provenance (see Raboy 1994: 71-2; Nguyễn-Duy 2012; Attallah 2013). Some local productions even attained world record ratings<sup>1</sup>. In 2017, some programs from the two most popular Francophone broadcast networks (Ici Radio-Canada Télé and TVA) still attracted between one and two million people, a very high number for a province of approximately 8 million inhabitants.

Among local successes, long-running serialized dramas called *téléromans* still garner some of the highest ratings. *Téléromans*—“Quebec’s distinctive TV fictional genre” (Picard 2011: 181)—are annual dramatic series (*séries dramatiques annuelles*), which means that they are yearlong TV dramas containing more than 20 episodes per season, and produced with lower budgets per episode. In terms of narrative structure, these fictions are similar to American prime-time soap operas and *telenovelas*. They are serialized fictions characterized by a large ensemble cast, a realist aesthetic and—at least traditionally—a focus on the private sphere (Ross 1976; Desaulniers 1996: 67). However, unlike American soaps, *téléromans* are always broadcast in the evening, in prime time. As a form of serialized drama, *téléromans* are made of open-ended episodes, and thus, to borrow Christine Geraghty’s definition of soap operas, “[t]ime rather than action becomes the basis for organising the narrative” (1991: 11). Apart from their high number of episodes and their lower budgets, Quebec *téléromans* are mostly filmed indoors, whether in studio or on location, even though they now regularly contain exterior scenes. Finally, not unlike American soap operas, which revolve

primarily around talk (Geraghty 1991; Allen 1995: 20; Gledhill 1997: 371), *téléromans* also perpetuate a traditional serialized form of TV narrative where *visuality* is “subjected to *orality*” (Barrette and Picard 2014: 116).

In a media environment defined by transnational flows of TV programs and the hegemony of US productions, the impressive popularity of Quebec *téléromans* might be explained by their “cultural proximity”. This notion refers to the commonly held assumption that these kinds of programs represent “shared history and cultural values” (Castelló *et al.* 2009: 3), which then explains people’s tendency to prefer these “local, nonimperial cultural products” (Straubhaar 2007: 26). In other words, the enduring attachment to local *téléromans* in Quebec has to be attributed, at least in part, to the audience’s perception that these TV fictions “are as close to them as possible in language, ethnic appearance, dress, style, humor, historical reference, and shared topical knowledge” (Straubhaar 2007: 26)—or, to be more accurate, are as close to them as possible in terms of how they *perceive themselves*. According to Alexander Dhoest, soaps (or their local equivalent) are even more frequently interpreted as “representations of ‘ordinary’, everyday life in the nation” (Dhoest 2013: 53).

And yet, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost nothing has been written about contemporary Quebec *téléromans*, since recent studies have disproportionately focused on shorter high-budget TV serials, usually referred to as local “Quality” dramas. By doing so, scholars have tried to legitimate the study of local TV fictions, but by the same token, they have tended to overlook long-running *téléromans* whose ratings still often surpass those of “Quality” short-running series. The study of Quebec *téléromans*, which was central to local TV studies until the 1990s but has significantly decreased since, appears more crucial than ever if we want to understand the complexity and multidimensionality of our current TV landscape.

In order to better understand the content of contemporary *téléromans*, this article provides a textual analysis of *L’échappée* (*The Breakaway*) (TVA, 2016-) and *District 31* (Ici Radio-Canada Télé, 2016-), two annual serial dramas currently broadcast on the most popular Francophone networks in Quebec, and which attract some of the highest ratings in the province every week. Through a close analysis of the stories, themes, and discourses provided by these popular fictions, I shall determine the “local elements” (Dhoest 2013) that may have contributed to their success with local audiences. These elements, such as the use of local stars, the representation of strong, assertive women and of regional identities, the

1 According to Gaëtan Tremblay: “A US TV series would need to be watched by 150 million people in order to top some Quebec TV hits from the 1990s, such as *Lance et compte* or *Les filles de Caleb*.” [my translation] (Tremblay 1993: B8; quoted in Bouchard 1998: 41) Original quote: “Il faudrait [...] 150 millions de téléspectateurs à une série américaine sur son propre marché pour équivaloir au succès de *Lance et compte* ou des *Filles de Caleb*”.

search for communal bonding, and references to real-life events could be interpreted as local characteristics of “proximity series”.

## 1. L'ÉCHAPPÉE AND THE DISTANT PROXIMITY OF THE QUÉBÉCOIS RURAL IDENTITY

Created by renowned *téléroman* author Michelle Allen, *L'Échappée* (*The Breakaway*) has been broadcast on the most popular network in Quebec (TVA) since 2016. Now in its second season – each containing 24 episodes – *L'Échappée* continues to garner some of the highest ratings in the province. It attracts approximately 1.3 million viewers per episode (Numeris), and therefore finds itself almost every week in the top 5 programs<sup>2</sup>.

*L'Échappée* may be described as a rural soap, centred on the lives of people living in the small fictitious village of Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski. The story revolves, first and foremost, around the character of Brigitte Francoeur (Julie Perreault), a forty-year-old singer who on the cusp of adulthood left her village for the big city of Montreal, following her dream to become a singer-songwriter. By doing so, Brigitte left behind her daughter Jade who got raised by her older sister Noémie. The story of *L'Échappée* starts twenty years after these events, when Brigitte comes back to her hometown to attend her daughter's wedding. However, soon after she arrives, her best friend Agnes is murdered, which forces Brigitte to stay in her village. The title of the series refers to the youth centre where many of the characters work, and where Brigitte will eventually find purpose by teaching music and dramatic arts to troubled, morally wounded kids. Therefore, even though the story is mostly focused on adults, *L'Échappée* devotes considerable time to some of the teenagers living at the youth center, and develops many story arcs around the dramas and existential crises of these kids coming from broken homes. According to creator Michelle Allen, one of the goals of this *téléroman* was to show that “kids in

youth centres all have terrible and complex stories, and parents who are either present, absent, well-intentioned or very clumsy [...]” [my translation] (Lemieux 2016). Incidentally, the choice to set the story in a youth centre was also motivated by the network's willingness to attract younger demographics (Baillargeon 2016).

On a different note, the main character is played by local star Julie Perreault, who is known for her work on popular TV series of the past 15 years, such as *Minuit, le soir* (2005-2007) and *19-2* (2011-2015). Quebec's rich star system is emblematic of the population's feeling of cultural proximity with local media (Straw 2010; Czach 2012, 2016; Attallah 2013; Lee and York 2016). Consequently, among other factors, the popularity of *L'Échappée* can be attributed to its main actress, and also, more generally, to its large ensemble cast made of familiar faces, many of whom had previously worked on other popular series or *téléromans*.

### 1.1 The representation of a “progressively conservative” woman character

As a specific TV genre, *téléromans* usually revolve primarily around women characters. The main character in *L'Échappée* (Brigitte) may be defined as a strong, assertive, and independent woman, a narrative choice that is probably attributable to the still-predominantly female audience for long-running serials, and, more generally, to the pervasive perception of serialized dramas as “feminine” genres (Brunsdon 1995: 58). Brigitte is indeed represented as a freethinking, autonomous, sexually liberated woman, and her professional aspirations as a musician are shown as something that distinguishes her from the rest of her family and friends at Sainte-Alice. Brigitte is also portrayed as impulsive: she often argues with relatives, and is not emotionally stable, although it will soon be revealed that her pregnancy twenty years ago was the result of a sexual assault. This dramatic element therefore provides moral reasons for her lack of emotional commitment and “maternal instincts”, at least at the beginning of the story.

Brigitte's existential narrative is therefore revealing of the kinds of ideological inflections regularly found in Quebec *téléromans*: these fictions have to appear progressive in their representation of strong independent women, while often re-promoting traditional gender norms in order to appeal to

2 *Unité 9* (*Unit 9*) (Ici Radio-Canada Télé 2012-) is an annual serial drama (*téléroman*) set in a prison for women, and is currently the most popular TV fiction in the province. However, for the purpose of this article, I have decided to focus on two other ratings hits, and mainly for two reasons: first, in order to study a *téléroman* from TVA, since this commercial broadcast network has usually been neglected by TV scholars. Secondly, unlike *L'Échappée* and *District 31*, *Unité 9* has already been the subject of some scholarly articles. For a detailed analysis of *Unité 9*, cf. Beaulieu 2016.

3 Original quote: “Les jeunes en centre ont tous des histoires terribles, complexes avec des parents présents, absents, bienveillants ou maladroits”.

a broader audience, a narrative convention that Mathieu de Wasseige has described as the “ideological balancing” (*balancement idéologique*) of broadcast networks (2013, 2014). By doing so, creators try to find some consensual middle ground in terms of the values embodied by protagonists. In *L'Échappée*, even though the main character is portrayed as an independent woman who has long been isolated from her family, the series starts when she comes back to her hometown and progressively reconnects with her relatives, especially with her daughter Jade. In that sense, the series focuses on a freethinking professional woman, all the while validating the traditional and essentialist definition of women as primarily “mothers”, since the main character will only achieve happiness once she finally acknowledges the importance of family, and makes peace with her identity *as a mother*. It is also through her volunteer work at the youth centre that Brigitte will find personal and artistic fulfilment. Indeed, as Jordan, her agent and ex-boyfriend, will confirm at the end of the first season, Brigitte has definitely found her “true voice” as an artist since she moved back to Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski:

[Jordan and Brigitte are having a beer and talk about their lives.]

**Jordan:** You haven't changed. [He laughs.] But your songs, they did!

**Brigitte:** You listened to them?

**Jordan:** Hmm hmm. Yeah. It's good. I was surprised.

**Brigitte** (smiling): Really?

**Jordan:** Hmm. Well, I don't mean that I was surprised your music was good, but...it's, hmm, it's more... raw. It's more sincere.

[Brigitte becomes suddenly serious, and she stares at the floor for a few seconds.]

**Brigitte:** No, but, I think this is what I needed: to come back here, with my family, with my daughter... after what happened to me. [my translation] (1.23)

At the beginning of the second season, Brigitte will also justify her desire to keep working with the kids at *L'Échappée* as a way to make up for her past failures as a mother. In sum, it is after she decides to stay in her village that Brigitte progressively commits to traditional values, such as family, communal bonding, generosity, or the love and devotion for others. In that sense, the character progressively aligns herself with values that are often considered “universal”, yet are also perceived as deeply rooted in the local Quebec culture, thus contributing to the popularity of this proximity series.

## 1.2 *L'Échappée* and the reproduction of a rural Québécois identity

The partial transformation of the main character's gender identity might have contributed to the “cultural proximity” of *L'Échappée*, yet its iconic rural setting is another important factor. Indeed, this *téléroman* represents rural communities as emblematic, in certain respects, of a traditional Québécois identity, most specifically through the representation of their capacity to create social bonds that seem almost impossible to reproduce in big cities. According to André Loiselle, Quebec films and TV series often rely on such a dichotomous view of the city and of rural regions; even today, in many series, “the rural continues to be constructed as either a salutary alternative to the chaos and meaninglessness of the modern city, or as historical evidence of an ontological identity for the *Québécois de souche*” (Loiselle 2009: 69). The choice to focus on Brigitte, the only character from the “big city” of Montreal, reinforces this opposition between Quebec's urban and rural identities. The fact that Brigitte will find emotional and artistic fulfilment in her village, not in Montreal, confirms this perception of rural areas as “salutary alternative[s] to the chaos and meaninglessness of the modern city” (Loiselle 2009: 69).

And yet, we should not jump to the conclusion that the village of Sainte-Alice is straightforwardly idealized in *L'Échappée*. As Loiselle (2009) argued, the representation of remote regions in Quebec dramas often oscillates between a form of idealization and demonization. Since the story focuses on crimes and broken youths, *L'Échappée* inevitably represents the downsides of living in a small community, where apparent solidarities can hide forms of prejudice and violent behaviours. For example, when Brigitte starts confessing to friends and relatives that she has been raped by David (one of the richest and most esteemed businessmen in the region), she realizes that some people do not believe her at first, and some even suggest she might be somewhat responsible because of her reputation as a “sexually promiscuous” woman. Moreover, since the story revolves around a youth center, this *téléroman* dedicates more narrative time to the stories of some of the teenagers, and by the same token, focuses on their violent, neglectful or distressed parents. As a result, this *téléroman* constructs the uncanny image of a village where almost no adult seems to be able to keep custody of their own kids. As is also typical of *téléromans* or TV soaps (Geraghty 1991), many male characters are portrayed as “villains” or, at the very least, as people whose gender identity is “toxic”



and patriarchal: for example, one recurrent character loses custody of his son because of his violent behaviour, while another is revealed to be a pedophile who sexually abused his step-daughter for many years. Moreover, David (Patrick Hivon) is clearly represented as the villain or “snake” of Sainte-Alice (Dumas 2017), a sociopathic, violent and murderous individual who is adept at manipulating everyone. Seen in this light, *L'Échappée* could barely be said to provide a one-dimensional, or idealized image of rural Quebec communities. Representations appear more ideologically ambivalent and critical, at once emphasizing the positive values of a close-knit community, while not diverting from social problems that happen in rural regions, as anywhere else. Moreover, the production company's official website describes Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski as an “idyllic community with an immense talent for keeping up appearances” [my translation]<sup>4</sup>. By doing so, the series provides constant drama, a necessary feature of annual *téléromans*, while making sure that it might seem appealing both to rural and urban audiences.

However, even if we take these negative portrayals into account, the overall narrative seems to lean toward a validation of remote regions and of their capacity for cultural proximity. As mentioned earlier, Brigitte's personal journey conveys this vision of rural communities as more loving, caring, gratifying, “simple”, and genuine—in other words, more in line with “real values” and traditions. Similarly, during the first season, twenty-year-old Jade and Xavier complain about the massive migration of younger generations to “big cities”, which is interpreted as a form of betrayal of the land, a disregard for the socioeconomic survival of remote regions. Moreover, one story arc concerns a group of villagers who fight against a multinational gas company, Petrofor, which wants to exploit the region's fossil fuel reserves. According to a local journalist (Dumas 2016), this kind of story arc is frequently found in Quebec *téléromans* set in remote regions, as it helps to confirm their representation as altruistic communities that are more ecologically committed than urban ones.

According to Castelló and O'Donnell, local TV soaps often rely on iconic outdoor shots in order to attribute a specific identity to a national community: “these ‘moving pictures of the city’ [or village] produce what Giuliana Bruno calls a ‘haptic space’, ‘a tangible sense of space’ addressing ‘the movement of habitable sites’, trying to link motion to ‘emotion’” (Castelló and O'Donnell 2009: 57). *L'Échappée* contains such

outdoor shots, which help to localize the story, while poetically reminding us of the characters' attachment to the regional landscapes of the Bas-St-Laurent. Seen in this light, this contemporary *téléroman* confirms Loiselle's argument that:

[...] the rural space [has often been] constructed audio-visually, in films [...] as well as in television series [...], as the repository of the fundamental values of Quebec culture; where the real Quebec is situated. When the alienated urbanite goes back to the country it is to rediscover the values—embodied visually in trees and lakes and snow—that she has lost somewhere along the way through overexposure to the busy streets, noisy bars, inhuman office towers and foreign influences of the city. (2009: 68)

In sum, Brigitte's personal journey in *L'Échappée* seems to update—and thus to exemplify—the “proximity” narrative of a cultural and existential reawakening through the rediscovery of Quebec's rural “roots”.

## 2. DISTRICT 31 AND THE CULTURAL PROXIMITY OF DAILY TV SERIALS

On the very same day that *L'Échappée* was first broadcast on the commercial network TVA, the public service broadcaster Ici Radio-Canada Télé introduced an all-new daily *téléroman*, *District 31* (2016-). Broadcast during the first part of the evening, at 7 pm, four days a week, *District 31* is the most recent instalment in a long line of daily serials for the public network. Radio-Canada's two previous daily *téléromans*, led by renowned producer Fabienne Larouche, were set in a public school, and thus focused on the daily lives of teachers and teenagers. Counter to this narrative convention, *District 31* is a daily police drama focusing on the investigations of detectives working at the police station of the district 31. Once almost nonexistent in the province, police television dramas have become increasingly popular in Quebec since the 1990s, and led to some of the most critically acclaimed TV fictions of the past 20 years, such as *Omertà* (1996-1999), *Fortier* (2000-2004), *Le Gentleman* (2009-2013), and *19-2* (2011-2015). Seen in this light, the choice to create a new police daily *téléroman* could be interpreted as an attempt to galvanize what many considered to be a dying TV genre, in a context of cord-cutting, multi-platform and VOD practices. Incidentally, it is Luc Dionne, a renowned scriptwriter especially praised for his

4 Original quote: “[...] communauté idyllique qui a un immense talent pour sauver les apparences...” (Amalga, official website).

police drama *Omertà*, who created *District 31* and is now in charge of writing the scripts.

By choosing to adapt the crime genre to a daily format, all the while relying on a “quality” crew and a cast composed of well-known and promising young actors, the broadcaster and production company (Aetios) hoped to rejuvenate the popular form of the *téléroman*. Defying expectations, *District 31* soon became more than just another hit for the public broadcaster: it attracted the highest ratings ever for a daily *téléroman* (Therrien 2017), breaking records made during the so-called era of linear television. The series soon attracted a cult following: many people started to express strong emotional attachment for the series on social media platforms, passionately debating the latest developments regarding the love affair between the two main characters. This situation culminated during the hiatus between the first and second seasons. Fearing that the main characters would be written off the show, numerous fans threatened to stop watching if creators did such a thing, and some even signed petitions. The subsequent season-two death of Nadine (Magalie Lépine-Blondeau) (2.20), one of the two main characters, thus became one of the most talked-about TV events of the year.

### 2.1 Women-centric serials: the love of work... and the work of love

Even though the story is quite distinct from our other example (*L'Échappée*), the main character in *District 31* during the first season is also a strong, independent woman, Nadine Legrand (Magalie Lépine-Blondeau). Contemporary Quebec *téléromans* perpetuate a narrative convention shared by many other forms of serialized dramas, such as soap operas, which is to “[...] feature strong women in major roles [...]” (Geraghty 1991: 43). In *District 31*, within a few episodes, Nadine is indeed promoted as the new detective-lieutenant, which allows the series to focus on her extraordinary leadership despite her young age. Nadine thus embodies the archetype of the strong professional woman, while also displaying other gender traits traditionally attributed to women. For instance, even though she is the “boss”, and she is shown to be “tough” and exceptionally dedicated to her investigations, Nadine is also extraordinarily compassionate. Most importantly, she is authoritative yet always considerate, paying close attention to her colleagues and valuing their expertise. Her embodiment of some traditionally “feminine” attributes, such as a caring attitude, is condensely illustrated in a short scene during which she talks with the mother of a young boy who

has been abducted and later found dead. Even though the detectives were not able to save her son, the mother (Florence) insists on thanking Nadine for her caring support during the investigation. “You show such compassion for others,” Florence says, “and there is a gentleness in you that is so reassuring. Sometimes I tell myself that through all this drama, maybe it was my Theo who put you on my path. Almost as if he wanted to tell me, ‘With her, Mom, it’s gonna be okay. She’s gonna take care of you.’” [my translation] (1.44) This is followed by a close up shot of Nadine who is shown to be on the verge of tears.

At the beginning of the series, many scenes of dialogue also attest to pervasive prejudices against women in the workforce. Laurent Cloutier (Patrick Labbé), the former detective-lieutenant whom Nadine will replace, is shown to be extremely unpleasant, even aggressive towards her. Daniel (Gildor Roy), the sympathetic police commander, will accuse Laurent of treating Nadine differently because of her gender. The series thus seems to acknowledge social prejudices, such as gender inequality, in the professional sphere. That being said, the popularity of this daily serial drama is also attributable to the long love affair between Nadine and detective Patrick (Vincent Guillaume-Otis), also working at station 31. Comments on social media websites as well as in many articles reveal that the on-and-off love affair between the main characters was one of the main reasons for fans’ intense temporal and emotional investment. *District 31* thus recuperates popular archetypes of Quebec TV productions (the representation of strong-willed women and sensitive men) (Boisvert 2016), which may have contributed to its cultural proximity. However, the fact that the main character was a woman also probably motivated such an intense narrative focus on the characters’ love affair. Seen in this light, the series capitalizes on the audience’s request for strong women characters, and follows the long generic convention for soaps, which is to focus on changing relations “among [a] community of characters” (Allen 1995: 19). But by the same token, this *téléroman* also seems to rely on a pervasive gender stereotype: that series with a woman as the main character need to focus on the “relational” and “romantic” aspects of daily lives – even when the story takes place in a police station.

### 2.2 The “reality effect” of *District 31*

According to Alexander Dhoest, people have “strong ‘referential’ involvement with domestic fiction, which is more often connected to ‘real life’” (2013: 56). Quebec *téléromans* often

refer to such real-life events and news stories. This narrative strategy helps to settle the fiction as an integral part of the audience's daily life and media consumption. In *District 31*, many situations and investigations refer to current or recent real-life events that have been highly covered by local media, which create "reality effect" moments (Glevarec 2010) and contribute to its cultural proximity. According to Glevarec, reality effects result from temporary moments of junction or contact between a fiction and the "real world" (2010: 221). In our case study, some of the investigations depicted in *District 31* are clearly related to real-life events, such as the important story in the first season regarding the disappearance of a boy named Theo Gagnon. This story recalls the highly mediated case of a young girl who disappeared in Trois-Rivières in 2007, and whose body was only discovered 8 years later, in December 2015. The subsequent discovery of the dead boy in *District 31*, only a year after the tragic conclusion of the real investigation, therefore hit close to home for local audiences. It must also be mentioned that some fictional events have been written prior to similar incidents happening in the "real world" (Therrien 2017). In these cases, similarities between reality and fiction have been explained by the author's wide knowledge of all political and criminal matters in the province. These numerous "reality effects" (the geographical and cultural proximity of fictional events portrayed week after week) thus undeniably contribute to the series' familiarity for local audiences.

It has been argued that "[t]he main feature of [a] *proximity pact* or complicity between the audience and the broadcaster is the preferential attention paid to news contents concerning the territory of reference" (de Moragas Spà *et al.* 1999: 6). As I have tried to argue, this does not only apply to TV news, but also to TV fictions. In the case of *District 31*, the creation of a "*proximity pact* between the audience and the broadcaster" also seems to rely on the "temporary conformist" (Macé 2003) reproduction of consensual and commonsensical views supposedly shared by audience members. The notion of a "temporary conformism" (*conformisme provisoire*) (Macé 2003) implies that the views portrayed in the series are not necessarily those of the "real" audience: it is a conformist representation of what producers believe to be the audience's values, knowledge and ideologies. This is also in line with Robert Allen's argument that

[...] the worlds of open serials [...] do not express a particular ideological "message" [...] so much as they mark out more general normative territories.

At the center of this normative space are those values, attitudes, and behaviors implicitly or explicitly believed by producers to be held by the core group of intended viewers. (1995: 21)

In *District 31*, many scenes adopt an overtly pedagogical tone as a way to inform members of the audience about technical procedures or technological innovations that they are probably not familiar with. More importantly, characters often express value judgments during their investigations. These sweeping and sometimes normative judgments may appear rather simplistic, coming from experienced detectives. However, these comments seem to have been written in order to "reflect" commonsensical views about certain topics. In some cases, such as the abduction of the young boy in the first season, this leads to quite predictable statements about the immorality and "monstrosity" of such a crime. In other cases, though, it leads to more controversial statements. For example, in the first season, detectives will dismantle a juvenile prostitution network involving many adolescent girls. The narrative then mostly focuses on one of the girls, Audrey, and her mother, who desperately tries to convince her daughter to stop doing this exploitative work. Quite tellingly, the series focuses on a single mother, which leads to perplexing dialogues in which the girl's illegal activities are explained by her lack of a father figure.

**Marie-Andrée** (Audrey's mother): What did I do wrong?

**Nadine:** I don't think you should blame yourself for what happened.

**Marie-Andrée:** These kids don't have fathers, it's obviously something they're missing. They don't have parental guidance, I can't do it alone.

**Nadine:** Stop it, Marie-Andrée...

[Marie-Andrée interrupts Nadine.]

**Marie-Andrée:** What do you think she's looking for, Audrey? Throwing herself in the arms of men twice or three times her age? She's looking for her father, obviously. [my translation] (1.22)

Two episodes later, Nadine has a discussion with Audrey, which once again leads to similar comments about the lack of a "masculine presence".

**Nadine:** Are you sure this is a boyfriend for your mother you're actually looking for? Isn't it more

like a masculine presence with whom to talk at home?

**Audrey:** That would be a nice change! Because the last thing men want to do with me is talk. [my translation] (1.24)

In many respects, these dialogues could be interpreted as perpetuating prejudices against single mothers, while pandering to masculinist ideologies, which tend to take away men's responsibility when it comes to certain social issues, such as the sexual exploitation of girls and women, and instead explain these problems as the result of the diminishing power of men in Western societies. Although not everyone obviously shares this opinion about juvenile prostitution, these comments in *District 31* may nevertheless be related to popular discourses about a current "masculinity crisis", a rhetoric that is often used as a way to explain many contemporary social issues (sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, depression, the underachievement of boys at school, etc.). In that sense, it might be said that one of the main functions of daily serials such as *District 31* is to echo, for better or worse, popular assumptions and views supposedly shared by the majority of the audience.

### 2.3 The cultural proximity of urban narratives

Of course, it must be mentioned that unlike *L'Échappée*, *District 31* is an urban narrative. For this reason, it could be argued that the popularity of Quebec *téléromans* has absolutely nothing to do with their geographical settings. And yet, upon careful examination, *District 31* relies on a similar vision of urban areas as mostly impersonal and dangerous places. Even though they are narratively different, police dramas could therefore be said to replicate this dichotomy between urban and rural areas (Loiselle 2009: 67) through their constant representation of cities as places filled with countless crimes, and where people do not seem to have time for a personal life. Of course, *L'Échappée* and *District 31* appear radically different in many ways: they are not aired on the same network, their geographical location is different, and their stories differ considerably. Yet, at the same time, they might be said to share a strange proximity through their negative—though enticing—portrayal of "the cosmopolitan corruption of the metropolis" (Loiselle 2009). Consequently, both series emblemize this popular opposition between the city and the countryside, which many have said to be at the roots of the Quebec culture.

## CONCLUSION

Language is "the strongest marker of cultural proximity" (Dhoest 2013: 55), and is of course the main reason why local TV fictions in Quebec have always been so popular. Since Anglophone TV productions surround the province, Québécois have embraced French-language TV series since the 1950s as "local" stories that could help foster a sense of cultural specificity. However, as I have argued, the popularity of Quebec *téléromans* may also be attributable to other forms of "thematic" and "value proximity" (Straubhaar 2007: 202), such as the reproduction of ideologically ambivalent women characters, the polarizing representation of urban and rural identities, or frequent references to current affairs, popular opinions and shared values. For this reason, the "success story" of Quebec *téléromans* acts as a cautionary tale for TV scholars. In the same way that recent studies have shown that TV is not "dead" but persists as a popular form of communication, albeit in different forms and new platforms (Orozco and Miller 2016; Lotz 2017), we need to acknowledge that the rise of Quality TV dramas (McCabe and Akass 2007; Newman and Levine 2012) did not lead to the "death" of older forms of TV fictions. Of course, it has often been argued that the audience for *téléromans* tends to be older than for other TV genres, which would mean that their popularity would soon fade. And yet, the unexpected transgenerational popularity of *District 31* should at the very least make us look for other explanations. While the transnational genre of Quality TV is often praised for its high production values and cultural legitimacy (Newman and Levine 2012), Quebec annual *téléromans* are more often described as forms of "comfort food", guilty pleasure, or familiar narratives. For this very same reason, they also feel "close to home".

The pervasive popularity of Quebec's *téléromans* in recent years undeniably contradicts—or, at the very least, complicates—the general assumption that due to the transnational circulation and digitization of "high end" TV dramas (Nelson 2007), people have lost interest in local/regional productions, and that TV series have thus ceased to foster local/national forms of identification in smaller communities. Analysing Quebec *téléromans* therefore fills a research gap in recent Canadian TV studies. These series remind us that television's transnationalization may also reinforce a need for narratives of proximity.

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*Unité 9* (2012-)

# HUMOR IN MOHAWK GIRLS: THE DEFT INTERWEAVING OF GENDER AND RACE

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## ABSTRACT

The sitcom *Mohawk Girls* (2014-2017) calls for a change in racialized and gendered identity models. *Mohawk Girls* deftly approaches racial issues, often in a serious tone, all the while giving its audience what it expects from a sitcom: witty dialogue, many of which play on issues of gender. Through the analysis of two episodes of the sitcom's first season, we look at how the show represents issues of race on a reservation and how racialism is part of the community's unspoken norms. Choosing to produce a sitcom, a genre heavily rooted in white North American

culture, comes out as an act of resilience that is manifested by the First Nations' director and producers. In the analysis of the documentary work of director Tracey Deer, an argument has been made to the effect that this resilience has historical roots in the culture of Hodinöhsö:ni' nations (once referred to as the Iroquois). In order for these communities to adjust to, at times, abrupt changes in their population, adoption of individuals or groups of individuals has long been an important cultural institution. This can be illustrated by the fact that the integration of a neighboring group to the Hodinöhsö:ni' is referred to in the group's own culture as an adoption where an outside eye might see it as the outcome of a political alliance. The show, through exaggeration and grotesque, takes on the issues of gender and its games of seduction, all the while considering the ambiguous interplay of seduction and domination. These borrowings are helpful in breaching a critical indent into the unwearied oppression that white society imposes on First Nations.

Do you realize [...] that when the United States was founded, it was only 5 percent urban and 95 percent rural and now it is 70 percent urban and 30 percent rural? [...] It means we are pushing them into the cities. Soon we will have the country back again.

(Vine Deloria *Custer Died for your Sins*)

## INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming a conquered territory is a battle with many bouts. It is played out in the real world when, yet again, lands of the First Nations are stepped on. The colonial appetite for land still marks the life of peoples of different nations across North America. In 1990, for example, a group of white developers tried to extend a golf course on Mohawk land in Kanehsatà:ke, near Montreal. Another sad and more recent example is the struggle by the Sioux at Standing Rock in 2016 and early 2017 to block the development of a pipeline across ancient burial grounds.

The battle is also played out on the field of cultural issues by the development of autonomous cultural institutions. In Canada, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) – founded in 1999 as a cable channel available across Canada from the springboard of 1992 network for nations of the north – is such an institution. Much of APTN's programming is made up of shows it commissioned. Thus, even if one takes into account the fact that, like other TV licensees, it presents some content developed in Hollywood, most of its content (80%) is Canadian and much of that is made by First Nations production firms. In its 2012 brief to the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, APTN could boast that other than content presented in English or in French, it showed more than 40 hours per week of content in different Aboriginal languages and dialects. In fact, almost half of the shows it commissions are available in an Aboriginal language version (APTN 2012)<sup>1</sup>. These shows are available as part of the programming grid and through the website [aptn.ca](http://aptn.ca).

Among APTN's programming, the sitcom *Mohawk Girls* is of particular interest. It takes on the issue of racism towards the First Nations and how this permeated within their com-

munities, giving to the concept of races validity inasmuch as it was left undiscussed. The show is centered around the love life of four young women but also deals with racial prejudice and blood quantum as a basis for Indian status. Considering the number of sitcoms that have given a large place to the relations between the sexes, the use of the sitcom format might seem typical on the surface of it. However, we read the show's adoption of a mainstream format as a basis from which to sidestep into issues of race. In fact, we will show that the adoption of cultural traits from other groups is a concept that describes especially well what *Mohawk Girls* does, and is one with deep roots in Mohawk culture and history. Thus, a concept derived from the Hodiñöhsö:ni's own epistemological background seems a useful route to understand how cultures and customs can mesh, and how *Mohawk Girls* is especially good at this.

*Mohawk Girls* was shown on APTN from 2014 to 2017. What does it say about the cultural background of *Mohawk Girls* to note that the show is directed by a Mohawk, Tracey Deer, and that it tells the story of four women living on the reserve of Kahnawá:ke? If cultures are moving and unstable aggregates, this is not less true of the Mohawks. Hence, we do not approach *Mohawk Girls* by identifying how it represents autonomous characteristics of Mohawk culture.

Although very little academic research has been done on Tracey Deer's fiction films, her documentaries have been the subject of some commentary. Amongst the research on her documentaries, Rebeka Tabobondung (2010) offers a few insights. The main argument in her article is that film and other multimedia works have made inroads for dissenting voices within the First Nations; in Deer's documentary work, she sees a fine example of this dissent as the Mohawk film director equates colonial policies' insistence on race and her own community's reference to blood quantum in its membership policy. One of the more interesting texts about Tracey Deer is a chapter devoted to her work in Penelope Kelsey's *Reading the Wampum* (2014). Kelsey finds in Deer's documentaries a view of the Mohawk world as a culture open to renewal and with a capacity for borrowing from the white culture, which she terms "adoption". The pertinence of this metaphoric use of the word is reinforced by the fact that actual adoption has always been an integral practice among First Nations. It was common practice to adopt a person from another nation in order to, among other possibilities, replace the loss of a member who had special skills. More importantly perhaps, if such a practice has been identified among many of the First Nations on the North American con-

1 APTN. *Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Licence Renewal Application. Application 2012-0993-2*. [http://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2013/2013-19.htm?\\_ga=2.141789745.2025133608.1499531153-152375325.1499130630#bm17](http://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2013/2013-19.htm?_ga=2.141789745.2025133608.1499531153-152375325.1499130630#bm17)



continent, adoption has a specific historical importance for the Hodinöhsö:ni'. The Hodinöhsö:ni', otherwise known as the Iroquois, is a confederacy of Aboriginal nations that includes the Mohawks. The confederacy's territory engulfs much of what is now New York state, parts of Pennsylvania and parts of Southern Canada at the junction of Quebec and Ontario. For a long period of time before the Europeans came, there had been five member nations. Early in the eighteenth century, the Tuscarora joined the confederacy which became the Six Nations. The political association was commemorated, as was the custom among First Nations for symbolically charged events, by the weaving of a belt decorated with beads, a wampum. It is known as the adoption wampum.

We have been using the expression First Nations – and just now referred to the Five and the Six Nations – as the Aboriginals use these expressions themselves. The idea of nation does not lend itself to easy definition. Is it racial unity, a shared culture, or a shared cardinal value, like that of democracy? Benedict Anderson's (1983) classic take on nations as imagined communities highlights the arbitrariness of these characteristics of nationhood. The most common contemporary views on the concept of the nation tend to involve culture and values and exclude the idea of race. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) has made a compelling argument against the validity of the idea of races as an artefact of misinformed science, and has termed belief in the existence of races as "racialism". All forms of racism are inherently racist. However, whether the use of the concept of race by some First Nations in order to grant Indian status makes them racist is an altogether different issue. With Appiah, we would rather describe such insistence on race – in the imposition of a blood quantum, for example – as an effect of racist beliefs. In their self-definitions, the imagined communities of the different First Nations tend to navigate between an insistence on cultural characteristics that were traditionally believed to be significant, and a reference to concepts of race drawn from more recent colonial history.

Valaskakis (2005) has shown how being Indian is the result of such complex references to the past and present of the Indigenous peoples. Elements of tradition such as animism afford very different categories of belonging, as the link to kindred souls can surpass tribal affiliation, identification to a species and even such occidental categories as the difference between the living and the object; the latter two have a history in occidental thought that is not universally shared by other cultural traditions. However, Valaskakis insists that present conditions are also of utmost importance and that "the

sense of identity that unifies Indians is a reaction to their ascribed status and relative deprivation" (2005: 219). For Kelsey, drawing on Stuart Hall (1989), being Indian is a "positioning". Kelsey's work, to which we are indebted, also insists on the copresence of past and present in any claim to Indianity. The present can (and must) be changed. However, the effects of imperialism cannot be erased. Kelsey would thus rather interpret the relation between dominated and dominant culture with the particular ethical determination that the concept of adoption carries, calling for an attitude of openness and welcome to others<sup>2</sup>. The Tracey Deer documentary that Kelsey studies, *Club Native*, is understood as an example of the complexities in the interrelations between past and present and a defense of a view favorable to the evolution of tradition.

The cinematic and audiovisual productions of Aboriginal peoples have been the subject of many recent studies. With the creation of APTN, the First Nations whose traditional territory encompass what is known as Canada have been at the forefront of these. The important work of Lorna Roth (2005) on the development of production and broadcast facilities owned by the First Nations in Canada is a good example. Roth notes that APTN and its prior incarnation "have been the only aboriginal television networks in the world to broadcast such a high volume of programming from indigenous sources" (Roth 2005: 217). Marian Bredin (2012) optimistically states that the APTN's main focus on Aboriginal programming "may ultimately result in the gradual 'indigenization' of Canadian media culture" (Bredin 2012: 91). Whether this vision will come to pass remains to be seen. However, most recent scholarship on the filmic work produced by members of the First Nations has insisted on the fact that our analyses need to de-romanticise the First Peoples. Roth devotes a chapter of her book to the broadcast policy-maker's imaginary and how it was necessary to develop views of the First Nations that do not essentialize these groups. Bruno Cornellier (2015) has seen the same fault in many movies from the end of the twentieth century that were directed by white moviemakers sympathetic to the cause of the First Nations. "In effect," he writes, "it seems impossible for these directors to imagine

2 One might be tempted to think that with this concept Kelsey walks a line already treaded by Homi Bhabba (1994) in shedding light on the importance of imitation of elements of the colonizer's culture by groups that have lived through colonial presence. Homi Bhabba's concept of mimicry has had an important success in academia. It would be interesting to compare adoption and mimicry as to the ethical stance to the other that they encompass. Perhaps one could posit attitudes to the borrowing of elements of a culture on spectrum going from the more welcome to the more critical, adoption describing the attitude at one end and mimicry at the other end.

an Indian whose experience of modernity would not be at the same time an experience of alienation” (Cornellier 2015: 114; authors’ translation). In the case of Tracey Deer’s work, there is no doubt as to its modernity. As Rimbaud has made it clear in the closing poem of *A Season in Hell*, the culture of modernity acts as an injunction, in this case to the effect that newness is good. However, Tracey Deer, without contradicting her modernity, can also be said to create works of empowerment for the Mohawk people; another injunction is central to her work and, in a paraphrase of Rimbaud, we could put it as “One must be absolutely Mohawk”.

In watching *Mohawk Girls*, one notices how it touches on gender issues with ease. When criticizing gender norms, the series is capable of sparkling humor. However, when it ventures onto racial issues, it frequently does so with a serious, dramatic tone. Often, the two issues intertwine; a set of differences that society has coded into stereotypes can conceal another. The production company for the show, when called before the Canadian regulatory broadcast agency, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) described the show as “*Sex and the City on the rez*” (short for Indian reservation)<sup>3</sup>. And the second scene of the first episode presents Anna, a character documenting her life on a vlog, thus updating for the 21<sup>st</sup> century the columnist trope of the Carrie Bradshaw character in the famed American TV show. Anna arrives on the reserve straight from Manhattan and, because she is snappily dressed, a snarky remark is overheard in the group of onlookers at the window of the small-town café: “Where does she think she is? *Sex and the City*?” Since *Sex and the City* has been at the forefront of discussions about postfeminism, we could wonder if *Mohawk Girls* is or is not postfeminist. However, we agree with feminist theoretician Lori Saint-Martin that “the word ‘postfeminism’ masks the social reality – the persistence of profound real inequalities between the sexes despite the equality in principle guaranteed by law” (1997: 236; authors’ translation). Kathleen Rowe’s (1995) feminist take on the sitcom provides a useful theoretical framework to understand why gender issues have been such a mainstay theme in sitcoms and helps in understanding how sexual difference has been used as a stand-in for other disparities within society.

In all likelihood, there might be more than one element explaining why the series plays on humor when tackling gen-

der issues and not when taking on racial issues. Some possible explanations belong to the reception history of sitcoms, others take into account the remnants of historical oppression against First Nations people, and its continuation today. In the following pages, we will analyse two episodes of the series’ first season: the pilot, “Welcome to Our World”, and the seventh episode finale, titled “Beast”. It is understood that such an analysis can only begin a discussion on the manner in which the filmmaker chose to present stakes that are transculturally shared by whites and Mohawks altogether with a self-representation of her community.

From the title of the sitcom, we expect a show with characters gendered as girls. The main characters are a group of four young women, all in their twenties. An episode early in the first season presents the heterosexual dating scene in Kahnawá:ke as one where the women are called on to approach the men. This cultural fact is one of the driving forces of the series, bumping each moment of action ahead in the different story arcs. Of the four characters, two are actively in search of a relationship: Bailey and Caitlin. A third character, Zoe, is a few years older than her friends. Being a young professional, she shares a house with her friend Caitlin, and claims that the dating scene should wait until she has invested in her budding career. Finally, Anna, of Mohawk lineage from her father, is the youngest of the group. She was brought up in New York, has just moved to the reserve and must learn the customs of the community. The dynamic of the show is built on contrasts between characters: whereas Bailey feels guilty when looking for love outside the reserve and taking the risk of having to move out, Anna is intensely involved in learning about the community in which she had only spent summers as a child. If moving out – to a certain extent emigrating – is anxiety-inducing, returning to the reserve also has its challenges. Valaskakis (2005) quotes from a First Nations testimony anthology (Nabokov 1992), which includes examples of the different behaviors people engage in upon moving back to the reserve, such as doing too much and trying to prove themselves. As for the other pair of characters, Zoe is overly responsible, whereas Caitlin has a much more free-wheeling lifestyle. Their relationship is best epitomized in a dialogue early in the episode “Welcome to Our World” (1.01, middle of scene 4 at 3:18). The women are talking in a café:

**Caitlin:** Must be lonely out on Mount Judgemore, Miss Perfect.

**Zoe:** I just can’t stand all the awful things outsiders say about us. We need to be beyond reproach.

3 Roth, Lisa. (November 7th, 2012). Transcript to the hearing on Broadcasting Notice of Consultation CRTC 2012-475. Line 1305. <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/transcripts/2012/tb1107.html>

**Caitlin:** OK. OK. There's no audience here, so you could just give it a rest, OK.

**Zoe:** My point is: We can't just do whatever we want. Or go to bed with whomever.

**Caitlin:** Speaking of bed, check this out! Myrezlove.com. You should totally check it out. Come on, you need a little bit of romance in your life. Plus, it might help loosen you up.

Whereas Caitlin's lines are emotional moving from the initial irritation at her friend to a newly found enthusiasm, Zoe stays cerebral. Her two lines are founded in a "us and them" perspective; the "we" in each of her lines insists on the sense of belonging and is posited heads on against the words "outsiders" and "whomever". In brief, we observe for each pair of characters that being an Aboriginal is an issue that intersects with all aspects of the characters' lives.

In order to uncover how *Deer* works the issue of race into her storyline, we have identified how different sequences of episodes from the first season form syntagms. Even if our reading is informed by a viewing of all the seasons, we have limited our analysis to episodes of the original season, the first episode and the season finale. The borrowing of the linguistic concept of syntagm has a long history in cinema and media studies. Our use is in line with Fiske and Hartley's (1978) classic semiotic work on television. A syntagm is a combination of formal choices (camerawork, editing, mise-en-scène, dialogue, etc.) that cohere into a meaning and in which ideological tenets transpire. These formal choices are the building blocks of the meaning process that is the syntagm. In order to approach these diverse elements, we have divided into scenes the two episodes that we thought pertinent to approach issues of Indianness. Scenes and syntagms are not equivalent, though at times a specific syntagm might be found in only one scene. Cinema semiotician Christian Metz (1966) defined the scene as a unit of action, space and time that can be presented in more than one shot, while globally maintaining a coincidence of screen time and diegetic time. Metz's methodology calls for a description of each shot that constitutes a scene. As a general rule, *Deer* builds scenes using many shots, the change in camera placement often used to produce the classic shot reverse shot structure. At times, however, the editing of one shot to the next obeys a different rule. With the show's comedic undertone, there are many occasions where the rapid pace of shots is important. In such cases, we will move down from the scene to the smaller unit of the shots that constitute it. Thus, we will at times stop at

minute details in order to better understand how *Mohawk Girls* opens a space in which the traditionally white-privileged genre of the sitcom can be adopted by the First Nations.

## 1. FILIATION: FINDING ROOTS IN THE SITCOM

The sitcom is a highly coded genre. Some of its codes have roots that go back to the tradition of the vaudeville and variety theater<sup>4</sup>. In terms of reception, the success of a situation comedy hinges on a play with the public's expectations: a sitcom should generally reproduce forms inherited from the past, whether the dysfunctional family, the group of quirky friends or co-workers, and if the series has a bit of pizzazz, it should be done with a hint of originality.

Kathleen Rowe (1995) in her book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* argues that feminism has had an effect on the representation of women in situation comedies. We have seen less of the archetypal homemaker, second fiddle to her husband, and the harpy mother-in-law (in the domestic comedy trope) and, from the 1970s and on, more women working as professionals or on the production line (in the quirky friends and coworkers trope). Kathleen Rowe goes on to establish kinships between the TV sitcom and two movie genres, the romantic comedy and the melodrama, which she posits at either end of a spectrum. Rather than the difference in tone between the two, the quick rhythm of comedy and the build-up of drama, Rowe differentiates these genres in regard to their narrative resolution. Thus, a melodramatic plot in which the unhappy ending is averted would not be very different from a romantic comedy. Reciprocally, a romantic comedy without a happy ending, or in the least the reconciliation, would take on the air of a melodrama. In both genres, Rowe argues, women have always been important characters:

Both narrate the stories of women with "excessive" desire which is limited to the realm of heterosexual

4 The sitcom can be defined as: "a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week, we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite, what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half-hour [...] The most important feature of sitcom is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored [...]. This faculty for the "happy ending" is, of course, one of the staples of comedy according to most comic theory." (Mintz 1985: 114-5).

romance and motherhood. Both use the deferral of sexual fulfillment not only as a means to create and sustain the fantasies of romance but as plot devices to prolong narrative suspense (1995: 110).

Rowe concludes that the variations in the love life of women characters constitute a decisive element in moving the diegesis forward. Comedies, both the movie romantic comedy and the TV sitcom, use the interplay between moments of drama and moments of humor to manage the suspense. Often a moment of comedy will act to slow down the pace before the plot comes to a resolution<sup>5</sup>.

*Mohawk Girls*, with four characters who all have complicated love lives, plays a tightrope act between romantic comedy and melodrama. For instance, most of the sequences in episode 1.01 are in a comic register whereas the season finale is more melodramatic. This is reflected in the respective scene structures of the episodes. The first episode contains eighteen scenes, most of which feature many brief shots; by contrast, the drama of the season finale calls for many overlapping storylines and numbers twenty-two scenes that feature, in many cases, longer shots.

The themes that each episode develops are a good indication of this: the first episode is built upon quite a few scenes that criticize gendered behavior and give the actresses an opportunity for exaggeration in their mimicry and posture; the season finale takes on high emotional issues, among them three moments of discussion on community and racial belonging and two scenes of intense discussion between two lovers having a hard time understanding one another. Accordingly, the use of close-up in the shot-reverse-shot structure across the two episodes is different. There are four in the first episode, seven in the finale<sup>6</sup>.

5 As a general rule, one might say that comedy has its particular techniques in playing up the narrative tension. The classic circus clowns make this clear. Whereas it is more often than not the White Clown who moves the story forward, the Auguste acts to disrupt temporarily the forward motion of the story.

6 In episode 1.01, we note the use of the close-up in the shot reverse shot in scenes 4 and 5, and at two distinct moments in scene 12 (the events portrayed in those scenes are the following: Zoe and Caitlin discuss their opposing views on sexuality; Bailey is accompanied by her lover whom she presents to her father; at a party, Bailey erupts in anger against one of the guests; later in that scene, Bailey meets the host of the party, Jack). In episode 1.07, we find close-ups in scenes 6, 8, 9, 13, 15, 16 and 19 (the scenes 6, 8 and 15 take on the theme of racial and community belonging; scenes 9 and 13 show couples in intense discussions; and scene 16 extends on a recurring motif in the series, disagreement between Zoe and Caitlin on the relative importance of having a love life; and finally, scene 19 has us closing in on Caitlin looking at herself in the mirror, with a positive pregnancy test in her hand).

Not only does *Mohawk Girls*, as we have just shown, weave drama in the romance, but also it serves its audience happy endings and neat resolutions of conflicts. Towards the endings of the two episodes under study, a couple kisses. In the first episode, the main storyline involves one of the characters, Bailey, learning that the man she is dating might be her cousin (that is, if stories about an act of adultery years ago are true). This information separates the pair during the episode. And just when they are reunited in a kiss towards the end, Bailey comes to accept that she would rather be prudent and not get further involved with the man. The season finale brings to a conclusion different arcs that have developed during the season, but gives two couples that have formed a sense that their love is true, hence the kiss in the case of one couple and the short dialogue showing a developing trust in the case of the other. Thus *Mohawk Girls* plays up the codes of the sitcom.

## 2. GENDERED FASHIONS AS A SYNTAGM

One might be tempted to cast away *Mohawk Girls* as a normative cultural product simply reproducing gendered codes. The opening titles for instance seem to pander to hegemonic representations of femininity with, among others, a low-angle shot of the legs of a woman in a short skirt and the hem of her sweater, two shots of a necklace with – in one case – a hand with a shiny ring brushing the shoulder blade, and of an ear lobe with a pink-feathered earring. The attention to clothing and accessories is apparent in most shots of these titles. However, as the episodes unfold, it becomes clear that Tracey Deer includes scenes meant to criticize the norms that articulate sexual difference in the contemporary liberal world.

The fact that fashion weighs differently on men and women has been understood for a long time. Early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf questioned the pressure placed on women as objects of beauty, aesthetically bettered by the deft arrangement of feathers on a hat (Woolf 1986: 114-119). Almost a hundred years later, the situation has barely evolved. A series anchored in the present like *Mohawk Girls*, with women as main characters, could not leave aside the issue of fashion.

The many facets behind the concept of adoption are of interest here. One idea of adoption is to make an object or a practice one's own. For example, it is common to say that a person adopts a clothing style. Adoption in this sense brings forward the interweaving of self and other. Is the care of the

self in one's clothing a choice or an unconscious capitulation to the dictates of an industry? In the relation of self to self, subjugation and possibilities for resistance nourish one another and are articulated one to the other. Fashion constitutes a prime example of this liminality between subjugation and its resistance.



FIGURE 1. STILL FRAME OF *MOHAWK GIRLS*  
1.01 SCENE 13 AT 14:32

Let us take a scene of episode 1 in which room-mates Zoe and Caitlin discuss whether or not Caitlin's choice of a dress and accessories are appropriate for a night out (scene 13 at 14:32). One of the shots in the scene is particularly telling as to the tension for a subject in-between self-affirmation and subjugation (see Figure 1). To the left of the frame, we see Caitlin's reflection in the mirror and to the right a shoulder and part of the back of her head. At the center of the frame, we see Zoe, absorbed in reading, a sheaf of documents in hand. If we consider mirror and documentation in symbolic terms, the opposition of the characters is reinforced; this opposition has profound roots in history, going to Plato's valorisation of ideal Forms and his criticism of images. If we were to follow this tradition, the mirror would be negatively connoted. However, the event that the scene depicts seems to bring out the qualities of the mirror. Of the two women, only Caitlin sees her reflection. She evaluates herself and seems to appreciate what she sees – her clothes, her hair. Hence the mirror has a double valence, at once negative and positive depending on how we address its use in the scene.

In the dialogue between the two women during this scene, there is a tacit agreement that gendered fashion is considered as an ornament for women in a heteronormative world, but disagreement as to whether or not one should conform to this. This is apparent in their dialogue which, af-

ter Zoe has declined her friend's invitation to go out, starts like this:

**Zoe:** The only kind of guys you're going to attract like that are the bad ones. Cai, you deserve so much more.

**Caitlin:** Thanks, mom.

**Zoe:** I'm serious.

Even if Caitlin's reply shows her irritation by pointing to her friend's nosing in her choice of lifestyle, the adequation between friendship and filiation that her reply implies is an indication of the tacit agreement between the two. In this sequence, the ambiguity of the motives behind the care of the self becomes quite clear. It is possible for a person to appreciate and depreciate oneself in the same instant. Fashion designed for women holds both possibilities in this case.

Another element of the two friends' discussion is the desire for a child. In Kahnawá:ke, a person's decision to start a family can get entangled with politics. Earlier in the episode, when the friends are talking in a bar, one of them mentions that having a family is seen by some as a step in rebuilding the nation. Whereas the bar scene offers a melodramatic discussion about family by involving it in racial issues, the discussion at home while Caitlin is in front of the mirror develops against an unquestioned heteronormative background in which sexuality and maternity are conjoined. The dialogue quoted above continues with Zoe advising her friend not to try to seduce a man she does not think much of:

**Zoe:** I hope you're not planning to...

**Caitlin:** To what? To find a man. To fall in love. To have all these cute little babies that will love me forever. Yeah. I'm looking for that. I can't wait for that.

We learn of Caitlin's desire for a child in a line that caricatures the narcissistic element of such a desire. Rather than imagining having children as taking up a responsibility towards the nation, Caitlin's character's line involves a series of emphatic words, "all" and "forever", in a fantasy in which the mother is represented as the permanent center of the world for her children. Even if Caitlin's desire finds its source in immature motivations, it has the merit of untangling the idea of having children from the political background of life on the reserve.

Consequently, it appears that the issue of gendered norms, here in a discussion that moves from rather fickle

fashion issues to attitudes towards motherhood, can cover up the undealt racial issues. The surface subjects are open to a comedic treatment. We could posit a hypothesis that sitcoms have developed more of an ease in humoring gender issues than racial issues. Kathleen Rowe believes that the openness to humor about gender is one of the characteristics of the sitcom since the 1970s:

Romantic comedy treats the social difference that impedes community as a matter of sexual difference and so builds the feminine into both its narrative conflict and the resolution of that conflict (Rowe 1995: 107).

### 3. EXAGGERATION AND GROTESQUE

Of the two episodes that we studied in detail, we noted a difference in pacing of the shots. Considering that one of the factors of comedy is rhythm, it seems clear that the first episode with faster-paced scenes has more of a comedic intent. If at times, the humor appears in the dialogue because of the line given to one of the actresses as the one we alluded earlier, at many others, the director chose to use the specificity of the audiovisual genres, namely shot size and angles, editing, scoring. If we stop only at moments where the comic effect is produced by such effects, there is on average a gag every minute and a half. The longest wait between two comic effects happens rather early on in the episode. Three minutes go by without such a gag.

At times, the visual humor is founded on an exaggeration of gendered norms. The first scene (presented before the

opening titles) includes the daydream fantasy of one of the characters. In that fantasy, she is marrying her current love interest. She and the husband are dressed according to the gendered norms of such an event. The actress playing the part farcializes the moment with her posture, standing on one leg and bringing the other to the back as she throws one of her arms upward (Figure 2).

Later in the episode, a shot reverse shot is used to suggest a confrontation. Tracey Deer adds a music track in which steel guitar and harmonica call to mind the atmosphere of Sergio Leone's films, bringing a touch of irony to the scene built around the moment where a father tests the young man his daughter just presented to him.

In terms of visual effects, humor often uses the body, at times by an exaggeration of facial expressions, at others by a taste for the grotesque. A prime example of the work with facial expressions is the time where an actress exaggerates disdain as she tells her friends her current love interest might be a cousin. Another comes up when one of the principals exaggerates the expression of desire as her character is about to open her laptop to watch a short self-presentation video by a fan of BDSM (see Figures 3 and 4 respectively). The grotesque emerges in two different moments. One comes in a daydream fantasy that is woven into the marriage fantasy discussed above, by imagining the child born of the union of two cousins, a small being with an immense eyebrow hovering above the eyes and hairy warts (Figure 5). As the episode comes to an end, Deer veers into scatologic grotesque, a character coming home from a night spent in a bar with a dried flow of vomit on her dress (Figure 6). The grotesque focuses on the way that body types which differ from normative expectations are to be considered monstrous, and it has been a source of humor for centuries. This focus on the body is of particular interest within the context of Tracey Deer's sitcom considering that *Mohawk Girls* deals with differences, both sexual and racial.

Men are secondary characters in the story. However, the episode does have a moment that stages men's bodies, playing both on an exaggeration of stereotypes and presenting an image that overreaches into the grotesque. In the ninth scene of the first episode, the friends get together to find out if the dating web site MyRezLove.com might be an option for them to find interesting partners. The scene is filmed in a variation of the shot reverse shot: we see the back of the laptop and the faces of the women in a lateral travelling shot from one to the other, and conversely a shot on the computer screen that they are facing. In one of the self-presentation videos on the



FIGURE 2. STILL FRAME OF *MOHAWK GIRLS*  
(1.01., SCENE 2 AT 00:36).



FIGURES 3-6. STILLS FRAMES OF *MOHAWK GIRLS* 1.01 (SCENE 7 AT 7:16; SCENE 13 AT 15:32; SCENE 8 AT 7:12; AND SCENE 17 AT 18:34).

site, a man, while speaking of his desire for a relationship, suddenly becomes violent and starts throwing various objects around. Another one ends his self-presentation by standing up before the camera seemingly getting ready to show his genitals; the friends rapidly close the cover of the laptop just before they come in full view. The least ridiculous of the candidates explains in his presentation that he is looking for a purely “fun and sex” relationship, no strings attached. In the MyRezLove.com scene, humor is used to question gendered norms of masculinity with a wit similar to the show’s criticism of stereotypes imposed on women.

#### 4. THE HODINÖHSÖ:NI’ ADOPTION WAMPUM

In our introduction we referred to the only published research on Tracey Deer’s work as a filmmaker. In her analysis of Deer’s documentaries – a 2005 film also titled *Mohawk Girls*, and her 2008 *Club Native* – Penelope Kelsey remarks on the fact that Deer gathers a community of interviewees

who feel that learning about their people’s tradition involves an openness to regenerating it:

The community gathering of traditional knowledge in *Club Native* serves to bring Kahnawake Mohawk cultural ideals into the present, while inflecting and transforming them [...] it ensures the continued use of these renewed traditions in the future for the purposes of building community (Kelsey 2014: 102).

In our opinion, it is possible to say the same thing of her sitcom *Mohawk Girls*.

One of the ways in which the series makes its viewers reflect on adoption comes in its developments concerning fetishism. There are moments where the sitcom offers an amused look at fetishism, others when it is critical. The fetish is not always the one to which media and advertising have accustomed the public.

Fetishism is the fixation of desire on a body part or an object, and its social construction plays an important role in the

narrative and life trajectory of a character in *Mohawk Girls*. Here, an analysis of the last moments of the seventh episode will serve to show how Deer weaves such a practice into her representation of life in Kahnawá:ke. At different moments of the first season, Zoe is excited by representations of BDSM. A scene in the middle of “Beast” (1.07) has her hesitate about entering a sex-shop. This is one of the few moments of comedy in this episode. Scene 14 of this episode begins at 12:31. In the first shot, Zoe enters the frame on the left, hesitates in front of the door of the sex-shop and goes out of the frame on the right. Then she enters on the right and walks out of the frame on the left. Finally, in the last shot, she comes into the frame on the left and finally decides to go into the store. Here the rhythm of the editing plays an integral part in the comedic effect insisting on the character’s hesitation.

Later in the episode, sexual difference as it is articulated by gender becomes the equivalent of a difference articulated in racialized norms. In a way, the end of the episode alternates between two representations of fetishism. Zoe is looking at an advertising leaflet that she picked up at the sex-shop. It represents three latex-adorned women in an ad for a fetish night. The camera closes in on the ad on which we can read: “Let Loose, Be Free”. The following scene is centered around Anna, the young woman who had just moved into Kahnawá:ke. She is at a party where people mingle and is taken by a burst of jealousy and anger at one of the women. The actress plays the emotion of anger by her facial expression, anger which is reinforced by a scene of fantasy where Anna marks her face in war paints. It is as if Anna acted upon the “Let Loose, Be Free” injunction through a fetishism other than latex. Whereas war paints have a social value, symbols of the warriors link individuals to the community and to nature. This scene moves the practice of marking one’s face to the private sphere. War paints have become a stereotype of First Nations in colonial representations, and have become heavily fetishized. Here the fetish is reclaimed as a marker for the pulsion of anger. It not only represents the pulsion but seemingly concentrates it. Such a juxtaposition of scenes opens a channel between private sexual desire and displayed cultural identity. It also acts to renew the gendered role of women in sitcoms, a role that Kathleen Rowe (1995: 110) described as bearer of “‘excessive’ desire” whether as mothers or as romantic partners.

The use of the situation comedy codes allows Tracey Deer to take on the sometimes-ambiguous interplay of domination through gender in order to breach a critical salient into the unwearied oppression that white society imposes on First Nations.

## 5. RACIALISM AS A SYNTAGM

There are times where dialogues in *Mohawk Girls* take the issue of white racism head on. In such cases, the heroines rebuff the racist remarks with a keen repartee. The series also considers racialism on the reserve in relation to the pressure to form a couple with a Mohawk of recognized lineage. An episode is titled “Marry Out, Get Out” (4.06), a clear reference to one of the effects of the Kahnawá:ke membership law.

Addressing such issues with humor might be difficult. However, there are a few moments in the episodes we have analyzed that venture into this territory. We have already mentioned the visual gag of the child born of cousins. This tackles the issue of genetic proximity in a small national group. More often than not, it is humor on gendered norms, typical of the situation comedy, which opens an indirect roadway into the prevalence of racialism within the Mohawk community.

Blood quantum is an important factor in determining whether or not a person can be considered a Mohawk of Kahnawá:ke. Section 11 of the *Kahnawá:ke Membership Law* defines the criteria for accepting members, some are cultural, for instance a sustained interest in Mohawk culture, others pertain to lineage. Among the many different cases identified in the subsections, there are constants: being born of at least one member and having at least four great-grandparents with Indigenous lineage. A person born of non-members can apply for membership if they have at least four great-grandparents from Kahnawá:ke, or, in the case of a member’s spouse, at least four great-grandparents with Indigenous lineage.

The first time the character of Anna meets the other three lead characters (end of scene 9 at 10:05), racialism is presented as part of the doxa in Kahnawá:ke:

**Anna:** I came to introduce myself. I’m Anna.

**Zoe:** Oh! you’re Ruth’s granddaughter. The one from New York.

**Caitlin:** So, your mom’s white. Hmmph!

**Anna:** Yea! I’m gonna live here and go to university in Montreal. It’s awesome that it’s so close. And McGill has a great philosophy program.

**Zoe:** Philosophy! That’s indulgent. You should be studying something that will help our people.

**Caitlin:** She is not our people!

**Bailey:** Caitlin!

— Short silence, summer crickets —



**Anna:** Well, I'm going to a friend's party in the city and I just wanted to see if you guys wanted to come.

— Longer silence, summer crickets —

**Anna:** OK. I'll see you around. I guess.

The dialogue constructs the drama of rejection, especially in the exchange between the characters. There are two moments of silence where crickets are heard in the background. Of course these sound (which are slightly heard during the whole scene) create a realistic backdrop for a summer evening. However, these silences, especially the longer one, become comical. After the first silence, Anna – seemingly so naïve that she does not perceive the sly remarks – invites Zoe, Caitlin and Bailey to come with her to the city. The fact that Anna is clearly out of sync with what is happening is made clear by the longer silence. Part of the humor comes from the fact that it is crickets we hear. In stand-up comedy, the sound of crickets after a poorly told joke is used to evoke the awkwardness of the situation. Even if being humorous on such a delicate subject as racialism is difficult, this scene clearly manages the trick.

In addressing racialism, Deer is true to the Hodinöhsö:ni' adoption wampum, both mindful of the existing practices within the Mohawk community and working to gently nudge these practices in a regenerated relationship to tradition.

The situation comedy genre is used by Deer to graft comedy codes that have developed in the particular context of television since the 1950s to elements of life in Kahnawá:ke where the series is set. The Mohawk culture is rich and diversified and can certainly not be encompassed by any stereotype made up by the colonial culture. In an essay published during the days of the Red Power movement in the United States, Vine Deloria Jr. challenged the validity of the representation of Indians as stolid and grim individuals. One of the chapters in his book develops the importance of humor in the daily life of Indians (Deloria 1969: 146). Laughter opens up the diaphragm. It opens a space in the chest. Space to breathe.

Deer knows very well that she represents clichés of gender. Such a choice entails a risk. At stake is the possibility for political recuperation of her work in the oppression of women. But her choice is also a play with social practices finding flexibility even where the norm is most apparent.

Playing with material is always a search for flexibility. Keeping this in mind, one can see *Mohawk Girls* as the work of an artist threading nacre beads on a wampum. A woven work such as wampum gains its flexibility in the constant

interplay of thread and the space between thread. *Mohawk Girls* has the flexibility of adoption in its relation to others.

And if the concept of adoption can be useful, all the while acknowledging that adoption is never without risk, it is perhaps because the interplay of woven thread reminds us the importance of play in human activity. Our aptitude for play as a dive in the imaginary opens a possibility of renewal in the games of seduction and identity construction as the episodes of *Mohawk Girls* demonstrate.

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# DIALOGUE WITH JAVIER MARZAL

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INTERVIEW BY  
NADIA ALONSO

Javier Marzal is Chair of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at Universitat Jaume I de Castellón. He has dedicated much of his extensive research activity to studies of local television. He has edited several anthologies on the subject, such as *The Public Television Crisis The RTVV Case and The Challenges of a New System of Governance*, *Regional Public Television in Spain in the 21st Century New Scenarios after the Closure of RTVV*, and *Los medios de comunicación públicos de proximidad en Europa. RTVV y la crisis de las televisiones públicas* (“Local Public Media in Europe RTVV and the Public Television Crisis”), as well as authoring numerous articles, book chapters and other publications. He has also been a speaker at the Commission of Communication Experts

from Valencian Universities, responsible for the report “*Bases para la renovación del espacio comunicativo valenciano y la restitución del servicio público de radiotelevisión*” (“Bases for the renewal of the Valencian communications sector and reinstatement of the public broadcasting service”).

**A** How do you think local television programming should engage with politics?

**M** Without a doubt, in a very different way from how it does at present, and from how it has tended to do it in recent decades. I think that local television needs to engage with politics; it is absolutely inevitable. All of us, as citizens, consume local news; we’re hugely interested in what is hap-

pening in our most immediate environment. Politics has very obvious effects on the local level, so it would seem logical that local TV programming needs to engage with politics. But it is crucial that the political authorities respect professional activity in the local communications sector. It is essential that politicians avoid governmentalising local media. And it is also very important that local private media outlets, local radio and television, do not turn into the acritical mouthpiece for local companies, business groups or corporations that buy their advertising or media services.

**A** *Do you think local television programming is necessary? And fiction in particular?*

**M** Local TV is absolutely necessary. It is a basic service, indispensable and inalienable, which we must demand of government authorities, and which should be expanded, because it is a reflection of our society and is also a tool for economic, social and cultural development. This is a question that has been studied by numerous specialists, and there is no room for doubt about it. In fact, big corporations like Netflix and Amazon are developing productions outside their places of origin, with the development of local projects, especially for target audiences with cultural realities very different from the American reality. And local fiction series are also essential for better connecting audiences in each region. This has been common knowledge for some time now.

**A** *Are there policies for genuine promotion of self-production of local programming on public television networks? Could such policies exist without political interests that determine content and ideologise it?*

**M** The contemporary reality is not very encouraging, because we have to recognise that local media in Spain does not have the maturity that would be expected this far into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among public television networks there is a perceivable resistance to innovation, to experimentation with new formats and genres. And, in general, governments are not aware of the importance that public media outlets have, at the national level and in the communications sector at the local level (region, district, municipality, etc.). In a country like Spain, the development of public media is heavily influenced by the political powers of the day. It has yet to be understood that there cannot be a healthy development of public media, or of private media, without political independence and economic and financial autonomy. In the context of public media, the development of local formats and content can only happen through innovation. The development of policies

to promote new audiovisual content and formats should be channelled through the least-politicised institutions possible. In my opinion, this could be done through the establishment of independent audiovisual councils (regional or national) that would propose communications policy. Total de-governmentalisation or depoliticisation is by definition impossible; it doesn't even exist in countries as advanced as Denmark, Japan or Canada. But it is important to create mechanisms and take the necessary precautions to prevent this.

**A** *What relationship do you think local television producers should have with the languages of the regions where they are based?*

**M** Local television broadcasters and media outlets, especially public ones, are created precisely with two objectives. In the case of regions where there are minority languages, as in the case of the Valencian Community, the Basque Country, Galicia or Catalonia, public media outlets have a mission to protect and promote the use of those minority languages. The second objective is to promote the local audiovisual sector and, by extension, to develop the cultural and creative industries of the region. People often tend to forget that the existence of minority languages is a cultural asset for the development of the knowledge economy; in other words, minority languages have a huge economic potential.

**A** *A lot has been said about the influence of TV3 on the Catalan independence movement; from your perspective, to what extent is local television in Spain contaminated by indoctrination?*

**M** To intolerable levels, unfortunately. And sadly, Catalonia is no exception. In my opinion, the independence movement is set on a path leading nowhere, as is Spanish nationalism, which has been incapable of responding adequately to many legitimate demands of the Catalan people. But I personally believe that the indoctrination of Catalan public media outlets is no greater than what may exist on RTVE [Spain's national public broadcaster] or on other regional public broadcasters. This surge in government control of public media needs to end the quality of our democracy is at stake.

**A** *Ideally, what positive qualities do you think local fiction programming should have?*

**M** In my view, local fiction programming, like local news, entertainment or educational and cultural programming, needs to be clearly connected to the political, social and cultural reality of the region. But this does not mean that

it should be absolutely “localist” it is important to aspire to producing content in a region that is “exportable” to other regions and cultural contexts, thereby facilitating intercultural dialogue, a very important matter in the world in which we live today.

Thus, and to this end, local fiction programming, in the context of public broadcasting, should be based on innovation, seeking new ways of engaging different audiences.

**A** *The new television station in the Valencian Community, À Punt, wants to promote transmedia fiction. Does this have the potential to renew or enhance the potential of local fiction programming?*

**M** It most certainly should. À Punt, the new public media platform, which integrates radio and television broadcasting and the management of a multimedia platform, has to begin with a clear transmedia mission, which makes it an exceptional case in the Spanish and international communications sector.

**A** *Do local television networks in Spain have a future in a context controlled by big media groups?*

**M** In my view, precisely because we are suffering from a severely imbalanced media environment due to the existence of a duopoly that dominates all press, radio and television production, local television networks and media outlets have a promising future ahead of them. There is abundant evidence that audiences are losing interest in what is currently on offer, because it is rather poor and repetitive. There is room for the development of local media outlets, at the level of municipalities and comarcas (districts), to meet a demand that right now is not being covered by the big media giants. In regions like the Valencian Community, it is evident that the local communications sector has seen very limited development, not only in the private sphere but especially in the area of community radio and television stations and in the municipal context.

**A** *Is a model where there are only regional public channels a good thing?*

**M** Of course, regional public channels should not be the only option. However, if we analyse the current radio, television and press options in Spain, we can confirm that public channels are clearly in the minority. And the existing private options are in the hands of a few; as I mentioned, we have a duopoly (Artresmedia and Mediaset) that dominates virtually all current production. Quality media options (and here I also

include entertainment) are only possible when there is a wide offer, and healthy competition between operators and companies, public and private. For the communications system to achieve a certain maturity, and to be competitive, there need to be regulators like audiovisual councils, at the regional and national levels, to oversee the effective development of public and private media production. I am convinced that the role of audiovisual councils is absolutely indispensable, as demonstrated by the activity conducted by such regulatory bodies in the most advanced countries in the world. In Spain, there is still a lot of work to be done in this respect.



# DIALOGUE WITH RODOLF GINER

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INTERVIEW BY  
NADIA ALONSO

Rodolf Giner has been working as a screenwriter for more than 15 years. He is currently the General Director of FAGA (Forum of Screenwriter Associations), an organisation bringing together Spain's most prominent writers of local fiction series. His most recent work includes *Paralelo* (La Tierra Negra), a project of his own that was selected for the second Television Series Creation Lab run by the Spanish writer's association Fundación SGAE, and *Planet Ripos*, an animated series co-produced by Vidoxmedia. Previously, he has written fiction for television series such as *L'Alqueria Blanca*, *Socarrats*, *Autoindefinit* and *Negocis de Família*. He has also written scripts for comics and other animated series, like *Las Aventuras de Marco Antonio*, for TVE, as well as non-fiction formats and children's programming.

**A** Ideally, what positive qualities do you think local fiction series should have?

**G** Local series are no different from what we identify as non-local series. In the end, they need to have a story that interests the audience and to tell it well. It sounds obvious, but it is a basic premise for any series. In this sense, we could say that a local series should explain something that the viewer needs to have explained. It should help viewers understand the environment in which they live, based on the idea that we all universally recognize elements that grab our attention and help us understand certain things, but every culture has its own elements that contribute to a better understanding of its own reality and its own identity. And, as I mentioned, the series should respond to certain parameters of quality

and their stories should be told well in accordance with the expectations for any audiovisual narrative.

**A** *Do you think local television is necessary, and local fiction series in particular?*

**G** My answer is yes, because in a global context where we have increasing access to universal stories, if as a society you don't tell your own stories, nobody is going to tell them for you. We might find stories that get close to our local context, but they won't show our reality. On the other hand, within those universal stories that tend to become standardised, local fiction series, in addition to fulfilling that social function of explaining minority cultures, contribute to the generation of differentiating elements that can be extremely appealing and help expose the viewer to other languages and other cultures. What I mean by this is that if Danish fiction didn't exist, we never would have experienced the same thing watching American series. However, thanks to Danish fiction, we can discover a country with a minority language and an audiovisual industry that has created stories that we've found really interesting and have consumed eagerly.

**A** *Are there factors specific to local fiction series that help them attract an audience?*

**G** To answer, I will draw on two examples. The first one is *L'Alqueria Blanca*, a period series set in the 1960s, broadcast on Valencian regional television from 2007 to 2013, which scored viewer ratings four times higher than the network's usual ratings. In this case, I think it connected very well with the spirit of its time. Valencians needed to be told at that moment that they were the best, in keeping with the discourse of the party in government in the Valencian Community at that time. The series explained that they were living in the best possible world because they came from the best possible world, laying aside the disasters of the Franco dictatorship that Spain was suffering at the time in which the series was set. For example, it didn't show the poverty of a rural world that was forcing its inhabitants to migrate to the city, or the rampant imprisonment and murder that characterised the era... In other words, *L'Alqueria Blanca* didn't sell a real past, but an idealised past, the past that the generations watching TV in 2007 wanted to remember; it explained something that the Valencians needed to have explained about themselves and it explained it well. The second example is the teen musical *Go!azen*, broadcast on the Basque public network ETB1. The series is in Euskara, the co-official language of the Basque Country, and is set at a summer camp where young people

get up to all kinds of shenanigans. What is curious about this case is that the channel ETB1 has an average audience share of 1% and this musical series has a share of 8%. The key here is that this is a story that meets a social need, because it shows the Basque people as cosmopolitan and modern, and also demonstrates that the Basque language has a place in the globalised world. As a result, it has turned into a pop phenomenon with Basque youth, who have been educated in Basque and speak it as their main language. In addition to all this, the series has been bought by Greece and is being broadcast in Basque with Greek subtitles. And it's now in its fourth season.

**A** *This last answer serves as a link to the next question; is it important to work in minority languages in local fiction series?*

**G** I consider it essential. Not only for the pedagogical value of television as a basic instrument for disseminating languages, but because societies have a need to have things explained in their own languages, because it brings it closer to them. Coming back to one of the examples I cited before, another of the keys to the success of *L'Alqueria Blanca*, apart from showing us as better than we really were, is that they found a register of language which, being cultivated, connected really well with the need of Valencian speakers for an audiovisual product in a language that sounded familiar to them and close to their way of speaking. And in the case of *Go!azen*, as I mentioned, much of its success was due to it being a musical series in the Basque language.

**A** *There are series like *Polseres vermelles* in Spain or *Skam* in Norway that have found success beyond their own national borders. Do you think they have done this because they are so different from conventional local fiction series?*

**G** I think these are cases of rootless series; I mean, they have specific premises, but their stories tell something universal, which makes them exportable to other countries. In the case of *Polseres vermelles*, it is a series in Catalan broadcast on Catalonia's regional network that deals with the everyday lives of sick kids and adolescents who meet in a hospital. It is a series that could be set anywhere and that deals with a universal issue, similar to another Catalan series called *Merlí*. This series is set in a high school and deals with philosophy, and quotes thinkers who are known worldwide, etc. Neither of these series have any geographical roots apart from their language, which makes them easily exportable. I could cite cases of American series like *The Wire*, which offers a realistic and specific view of Baltimore, or *Boardwalk Empire*, which



presents a very clear picture of what the mafia and Irish immigration were like in Atlantic City. Both series have attracted a lot of viewers outside their borders because they deal with universal themes based on specific suggestions. Linking back to where we started, I think what's good about local fiction series is that, if they're able to combine the elements that are most characteristic and identifiable for their local audience with universal themes and to tell their story well, obviously they'll go far. And the specifically unique part, with the most familiar, local geographical roots, won't work against the universal story; on the contrary, it will offer a new and different point of view on a universal theme. And that is the *raison d'être* of local fiction series in a context dominated by big media groups and distribution platforms. In other words, people are going to want to see a story they already know, but with its own distinguishing features. We all operate within the same narrative logic. But I think that ability to distinguish what's different within the sameness actually enhances rather than reduces the international potential of any series.



# LAPIS LAZULI. POLITICS AND AQUEOUS CONTINGENCY IN THE ANIMATION STEVEN UNIVERSE

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## ABSTRACT

*Steven Universe* (2013-), the North American cartoon produced by Cartoon Network, has been receiving attention from the media, the public and academia for its break with the relative norms of programs directed towards child audiences. It is the first animated series created by a woman (Rebecca Sugar) on Cartoon Network, and one of the first to centralize queer character narratives, breaking

gender normative binarism. The present essay analyzes how the series further problematizes the questions of gender and sexuality by breaking with the binary norms related to the separation of nature and culture in Western ontology by means of the character Lapis Lazuli and her hydrokinetic powers. Mapping Lapis Lazuli's operation suggests that water emerges as an anti-colonial, eco-queer and posthumanist element, highlighted by her active power in the constitution of material and identity, breaking the dichotomies from the plurality. Water is the element that unites human and non-human bodies through material affinities, participates in the configurations of difference, and is the constitutive force of local and planetary space, beyond the fundamental contingency in the creation and destruction of ideas, political projects and feelings, furthering a more complex comprehension of its presence in everyday life..

## INTRODUCTION

*Steven Universe* (2013-), a fantasy/science fiction animation created by Rebecca Sugar and broadcast on the Cartoon Network TV channel since 2013, has revolutionized the cartoon world in different ways by establishing a radical break with gender norms, especially in regard to queer representations. A key feature of science fiction narratives is the imagination of different norms, realities, and future possibilities. In many cases, these confront the structures of contemporary life, presenting new ways of thinking about current issues related to science, technology, gender, race, and nature, among others (Badmington 2004, Melzer 2006, Pearson et al. 2008). In science fiction literature, the dissolution of gender and sexuality boundaries has been a reality since at least the 1950s (Pearson 2008: 97).

In cartoons, however, issues related to gender and sexuality are still approached less explicitly. According to Kat Ottaway (2016), who employs the concept of failure from theorist Judith Halberstam, *Steven Universe* fails completely in agreeing with social normalization or aligning itself with mainstream children programs, being dissident and anti-colonial (Ottaway 2016). Other authors follow the same line of thought, analyzing and showing that themes related to identity, sexuality, homophobia, gender relations and the representation of agendered and trans-women are approached in a complex and realistic way, provoking, in some cases, reactions and tensions on the social level (Dunn 2016, Bakker 2015).

Although these studies recognize the queer characteristics of *Steven Universe*, their analyses are restricted issues involving sexuality and identity. Other aspects of the series related to the breakdown of well-established binary colonial norms in modern social thought are less addressed. Ecofeminist studies from the 1990s, however, were already pointing to the colonial intersections among homophobia, sexism, racism and ecophobia, pointing out the colonial fear directed towards individuals associated with nature or the breakdown in hegemonic meanings of nature (Gaard 2015). Material feminists, through science studies, also point out the ways in which modern thought, forged in Cartesian realism, is responsible for the reinforcement of racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism and the current environmental crisis (Haraway 1991, Barad 2003, Barad 2007, Alaimo 2010). On the other hand, eco-queer authors have recognized that sexuality and the environment are entangled questions, where relations of gender and sex interfere in the production of the material world and vice-versa (Mortimer-Sandilands and

Erickson 2010: 5, Sbicca 2012: 34-5). In general, these studies deconstruct the world's binary relations in favor of recognizing that we inhabit a planet in common, marked by a plurality of forms of material existence and identity.

There is also a group of studies by ecofeminist and eco-queer authors, such as Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, who propose a so-called hydrological turn. For these authors, themes such as race, indigeneity, studies of science and technology, the environment, gender, and sexuality can be approached through a perspective that is less anthropocentric and colonial that includes water as an active agent. To think with water would allow a more relational form of analysis, rejecting the dichotomies that engender colonial forms of hierarchy and domination on the local and planetary levels (Chen et al. 2013: 11). The hydrological cycle, in this case, is conceived in a different manner, searching for the cultural and material human implications in the bodies of non-humans and vice-versa, by the element in common that circulates, passes through and unites all of these bodies on the planetary level: water (Neimanis 2017: 6).

In Donna Haraway's work, it is possible to identify how science fiction stories can function as political theory by identifying absences in the real world, imagining alternative presents, and promoting alternative ontologies (Haraway *apud* Grebowicz and Merrick 2013: 112-3). On the other hand, Merrick (2008) suggests how the image of the alien creature, with all the transgressions and strangeness that it promotes, can be an important ally for ecofeminism and queer theory, which understand gender identity as permanently unstable and connected to issues of race, economics, politics and the environment (Merrick 2008: 216-8). These are the main possibilities for analyzing *Steven Universe*, which promotes in its narrative several ways to rethink established patterns, mainly of gender and nature, from characters and events.

This essay asserts that the gender non-binary characteristics of *Steven Universe*'s characters extend beyond the boundaries between human and non-human, with this condition being the most visible in the form of water as it emerges from the character Lapis Lazuli, a Gem liberated from the mirror by the protagonist, Steven, in the episode "Mirror Gem (Part 1)". In *Steven Universe*, waters possess a diversity of forms that work by conforming bodies and places and affecting the world, challenging the current social notions of water as a social representation or as a naturally passive resource managed by humans. The scenes presented throughout the essay below help in following the waters in *Steven Universe*, identifying how this element acts contingently in

the political, material and identitarian configurations in the story, suggesting the need for a relational perception of space in the real world.

## 1. WATER AS A POLITICAL AND SOCIO-NATURAL FORCE

Steven is a Human-Gem hybrid child who lives in a place called Beach City. He is the product of the relationship between the Crystal Gem Rose Quartz and a human, Greg Universe. The Crystal Gems are inhabitants of the planet Homeworld, whose government had colonizing ambitions towards planet Earth. They are agendered aliens with inorganic characteristics that dedicated themselves to the protection of life on Earth. What materially defines them are their gems, which conform into illusory and malleable female bodies that can modify themselves and magically merge with other Gem bodies (Dunn 2016). Rose had to give her life to be able to conceive Steven, who has since then been living with three other Crystal Gems: Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl. The four live in a house on the beach in a distant location of the city. Despite this proximity to the sea, space and water acquire more relevant functions only with the appearance of Lapis Lazuli.

In the episode “Mirror Gem (Part 1)” (1.25), Steven is intrigued by the fact that his friend Connie is going to school and having summer vacation. Recognising that Steven would like to acquire knowledge, Pearl gives the boy a mirror found in another galaxy that can supposedly show historical events from the Gem universe. Pearl tests the power of the mirror in front of Steven but does not obtain any information from the artifact, subsequently concluding that it must be broken. Neither of them knows that, inside the mirror, there is an imprisoned Gem, Lapis Lazuli.

With the mirror in hand, Steven runs to the streets of Beach City’s shore when he bumps into a table at the cafe where his friends Lars and Sadie Miller work, knocking it over. Lars screams at Steven, and the boy explains that he is excited for the arrival of summer. Sadie Miller responds that she is excited to put more tables outside the café, waiting for an increase in store movement, something typical of this season. Miller interrogates Lars about her plans for the summer, and the youth responds that she is waiting for the young tourist women who will come to the city without their boyfriends. With the intention of provoking jealousy in Lars, Miller also shows interest in arranging a “new friend” among the tourists.

Still walking on the boardwalk of the beach, Steven is almost run over by the mayor of the city, Bill Dewey, who is driving his car on the pavement. This moment marks Steven’s first active contact with Lapis Lazuli, who, from inside the mirror, reflects the car and subsequently reproduces the image of Lars at the cafe, screaming things said moments before. Steven stops in front of the mayor’s sound-equipped car, which abruptly brakes. The mayor interrogates Steven with a megaphone as to what is his motive crossing his path. The boy responds by asking what the mayor was doing driving near the boardwalk since doing so was prohibited. In this moment, Bill Dewey emphasizes his position as mayor and that because he is a representative of the city, he can do what he wants.

Lapis Lazuli is on an involuntary tour in Beach City. Imprisoned in the mirror, she is only a passive object that interests Steven in that moment. The scenes allow a mapping of the economic and political activities carried out in the boardwalk of Beach City and the distribution of power, mainly expressed in the commerce that benefits from the tourism and in the city hall, which seeks visibility for its management. The interests at hand and the inequality are evident, which is the that business circulates to obtain profit from the arrival of the tourists. The mayor, Dewey, mobilizes his propaganda apparatus to promote his management, exploiting the movement of the economy leveraged by summer vacation. Steven emerges here as a marginalized individual in the local power relations, getting in the way of Lars and Miller’s job (representing private power) with his childlike ways and placing himself in Dewey’s path (representing public power), and he is reprimanded by both sides. However, the mayor is the only one to place himself above the others and any social contract by arbitrarily emphasizing a privileged position in terms of power. However, the authoritarian attitude of Dewey has its consequences. He is in full campaign for reelection and holds a rally at the beach. Still inside the mirror, Lapis Lazuli imitates the sounds made by Steven’s mouth, rattling Dewey’s speech. The sounds made by her and by Steven provoke an outburst of laughter in the audience, interrupting the rally.

Recently, some researchers have they attributed political agency to bodies of water. Is it possible to say that the waters can interfere in political projects, initiate debates, and strengthen or weaken certain groups in their claims? In the classic book *Rivers of Empire* (1985), for example, Donald Worster analyzes the emergence of a hydraulic politics in the western USA in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing water as the dominate resource by a certain political and

economic elite that, from this dominion over the region's water resources, exercised power over society (Worster 1985). Erik Swyngedouw (2004), on the other hand, conceives a continuum between flows of water and power, where scarcity or abundance of water is intimately tied to social inequality in cities (Swyngedouw 2004). In both cases, in distinct ways, the researchers are working with waters that have been targets for human intervention in the construction of space in rural and urban areas. However, some studies go further by drawing attention to the possibilities of understanding water as a political agent, comprehending that the intentions, the interests and the political transformations at play are also affected by the material conditions from whence they emerge. Jane Bennett (2010), for example, analyzes the necessity of mapping the force of the events and objects in the configuration of debates and intervention in political processes (Bennett 2010). A similar opinion is expressed by Cecília Chen et al. (2013), who question more specifically if the dynamics of waters can also be understood as a socio-natural force that acts in the conformation of political decisions (Chen et al 2013: 5).

Waters, as socio-natural planetary forces, transform, create and destroy social and political aspects in any part of the world (Chen 2013: 277). The material presence of the water in the events in *Steven Universe* points to a larger vision of water's impact on social life, going beyond the anthropocentric conception of representation and of the utilitarian perception of water as a natural resource. Lapis Lazuli, still inside the mirror, distract the attention that the audience of Beach City is paying to Dewey by imitating the sounds made by Steven. Ridiculed, the mayor stops the rally. However, in this case, Lapis Lazuli is still inside the mirror and cannot use her hydrokinetic powers. Her powers will be realised only when Steven liberates her from the mirror, in the moment in which the Crystal Gems try to recover the artifact. Freed, Lapis Lazuli confronts the Crystal Gems, giving examples of her force. The waters of the ocean take different forms under Lapis' orders, where waves, offshoots, and the sea open. She is able to escape.

In the following episode, "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), the population of Beach City and the Crystal Gems are surprised by the drastic recession of the sea: the coastal city happens to be facing an immense drought, causing drama for the local population. With the ocean recession, the merchants and fishermen are apprehensive and demand action by the municipal government. The merchants fear a drastic fall in the number of summer tourists passing through the city. Ronaldo

Fryman asks who will buy his French fries, and another merchant asks about his pizza; others ask about the clientele of the theme park. Lars is sorry there will not be more girls from abroad coming for her to flirt with. Dewey despairs in front of the Crystal Gems. He cries on his knees, screaming into his megaphone that the coastal city has transformed into a desert and that no one else will come there for vacation, which could cause enormous economic damage.

With his apocalyptic discourse, Dewey seeks to share the merchants' feeling of being victim of a catastrophe beyond his will and power. It is something "magical" or "from nature", a phenomenon external to humans. It is important to note how this discourse of "natural disaster" works to shield any public power from being held responsible for such an event. Before the merchants can continue in their complaints, Dewey resumes his authoritative style and demands an explanation from the Crystal Gems, trying to blame them for the phenomenon. Bill Dewey knows that the water recession also represents a political catastrophe. In the following scenes, the mayor appears in tears, holding a hose that pours water onto the sand. Dewey's desperation is evident: sweaty and unkempt, with an unshaven beard and clashing suit, he is sorry for the probable end of the city's economy, of his administration and, consequently, of his personal political project.

The loss of the sea has the potential to destroy the city's economy, which is intimately connected to its coastal location and resources. Both private projects and Dewey's political project are threatened by this drastic reconfiguration of geography. The sea's recession materially affects Beach City in a way that resembles Astrida Neimanis's (2013) notion of dissolution. It is a contingency, an unknowable phenomenon completely beyond the expectations of different groups and individuals. In the story it concerns the disappearance of the sea. The effect generated by this event is contingent, mirroring with consequences of real phenomena involving large bodies of water, such as a tsunami, a hurricane, or the large-scale pollution of coastal waters.

Dissolution and unknowability are two "hydro-logical categories" that are ways in which bodies of water exist, have relationships, transform themselves and materially affect other bodies, according to Neimanis's (2013) material feminist perspective. Dissolution would be the high power of destruction, creation and socio-natural transformation associated with flooding, tsunamis, and hurricanes. Unknowability is the inability to know oneself, to foresee or control anything connected to the movement of water (Neimanis 2013: 30-1). The category of dissolution, from the perspective of this ar-

ticle, also works as an agentic swarm, which is Jane Bennet's definition for the major events that open debate and dramatic material and political reconfigurations. For Bennet, objects, human individuals, ideas and events are heterogeneous compositions formed by different entities, whether human or non-human. The compositions, however, do not possess a central point that determines their effect. The effect is always congregational and distributed in a continuum which is produced by and affects various locations and the locus of power, frequently in a contingent manner (Bennett 2010: 28). The diverse reactions and consequences of the ocean recession in Beach City emphasize the fractal and contingent condition of the event, molding a radical interdependency among groups, individuals, ideas, politics and waters.

Understanding of the ways in which large bodies of water shape political changes, challenges and opportunities has emerged in the last few years through studies of hurricanes, rupturing traditional ways of analyzing water as a natural resource or subject of representation. In his work *Sea of the Storm*, the historian Stuart Schwartz analyzes five centuries of political and social impacts related to the passage of different hurricanes through the Caribbean islands. Each of these impacts is very different from the others, depending on the political responses and interests in play (Schwartz 2015). On the other hand, Nancy Tuana recognizes the porosity and the material agency of storms in her study of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, and its capacity to foment political and social tensions (Tuana 2008). Both projects reject waters as a scenery of human actions but favor viewing these bodies as co-constitutive agents of material, social and political relations. In the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), this is illustrated in the way the ocean is presented as a co-constitutive agent of personal, economic, and political projects, by being part of the existence of the human and non-human inhabitants of the space. The water is an active participant in these projects, and the recession of the sea makes this condition more evident due to its dramatic and unpredictable consequences.

On the other hand, Lapis Lazuli's hydrokinetic power, by provoking phenomena of a dissolute and unknowable nature, bears similarities to an "alien science", marked as evil, manipulative, and magical in science fiction literature until the 1970s. This "science" is associated with the subjective and the feminine, forging a difference from the science and technology of humans, which is associated with the objective and the masculine (Melzer 2006: 8). It is not by chance that humans and non-humans share the consequences of the

sea's retreat. Although the Crystal Gems are also aliens, Lapis Lazuli emerges as the real threat to the planet through her hydrokinetic power. This fundamental difference remains the hallmark of the character, providing broader and deeper questions about the role of water in the planet and human existence.

Faced with the apparent disappearance of the ocean, Steven, Greg, Connie, the Lion and the Crystal Gems travel in search of Lapis Lazuli. Along the way, one can perceive the desolation of the marine environment without the waters. Corals and plant life suffer from the absence of water, but no dead animals are observed on the trip. After a long journey, Steven and the Crystal Gems arrive at a large tower formed by the waters of the sea. Within it, numerous species coexist, imprisoned, as in a gigantic aquarium. Thus, the retreat of the sea, as an event, is an aqueous contingency, beyond the human political dimension, promoting the emergence of varied realities and consequences interconnected by the force of waters in the conformation of space and interference in the rhythms of different life forms.

## 2. HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN GROUPS AS BODIES OF WATER IMMersed IN WATER

Lapis Lazuli desires to return to her home planet, Homeworld, but does not know how to do so. Her gem stone was broken, and so she cannot form wings and fly there. A giant tower formed by seawater is created in the hope of making a path to her planet. In Lapis's desperate effort, the waters offer the possibility of communication between Homeworld and Earth.

Lapis Lazuli's hydrokinesis is a plural power that grants her strong mental control over the waters in liquid, solid and gaseous states, in other words, the three stages of the hydrological cycle. This control does consist in domination, but in the continuum between the body, the gemstone, and bodies of water. Lapis Lazuli is a quintessential body of water. Lapis's eyes, before her gems were fixed by Steven, are similar to clear waters, reflecting any image. To look in her eyes is similar to glimpsing one's own image in a water mirror, as in the myth of Narcissus (Figure 1). Her wings are made of water that sprouts from the gemstone on her back, the same way as her feminine body. Lapis Lazuli's slender body, with her hair and clothes in different tones of blue, furthers the confusion between her and the water that is under her control.



FIGURE 1. SCREENSHOT FROM “MIRROR GEM (PART 1)”, *STEVEN UNIVERSE* 1.25.

Some researchers draw attention to the malleability of the Gems’ bodies, which change form by merging themselves with other Gems in a magical ritual that involves intimacy, eroticism and romance, or which stems solely from their own magical powers, as in the case of the constant transformations of Amethyst (Dunn 2016, Ottaway 2016). Eli Dunn (2016) points out the queer characteristics of this corporeal malleability, which dissolves the material and naturalized restrictions of gender representation (Dunn 2016: 46). However, Lapis Lazuli does not modify herself solely by means of magic or by fusion with another Gem. The malleability of Lapis’s body is also associated with the expansion of the water present in the interior of her body and with the water that conforms the space, without any material mediation.

The magic in this narrative works similarly to a believable connector between different bodies of water and Lapis Lazuli, pointing to a material and discursive inseparability between the individual and the local and planetary space. Magic is also another dimension of an “alien science”, not associated with evil or manipulation but with a perspective of collabo-

rative engagement with the environment. At this point, the affinity of the alien power is evident with an eco-queer vision that challenges the hegemonic ontology largely raised in separation of the natural and the unnatural, expanding the interrogation of the naturalization of sexuality and gender, to defend hetero-normative standards, at the same time that

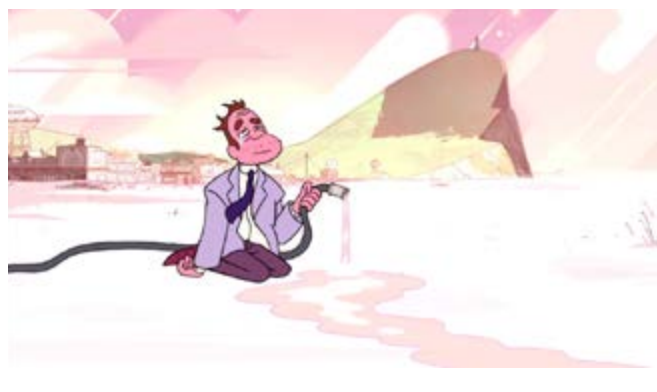


FIGURE 2. SCREENSHOT FROM “OCEAN GEM (PART 2)”, *STEVEN UNIVERSE* 1.26.



“naturalized” spaces and agents are colonized, exploited, and degraded as entities separated from the human (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010: 5).

This challenge is more explicit in the apparent counterpoint in relation to the control that the humans supposedly have over the water. Helpless in the face of the sea’s recession, Dewey cries as he pours fresh irrigated water from a hose onto the sand (Figure 2). The irrigated water is that over which humans possess some control, measured by the hose, a technical object. Although the hose appears only in this scene, it is possible for the viewer to deduce that it is connected to a faucet, which is the tip of a complex technological apparatus that forms a network of urban refueling for Beach City. The tears that fall down Dewey’s face and the sweat stain on his suit draw attention to the fact that he is also a body of water similar to any other kind of living creature. Nearly 65% of his body, as with any other human body, is formed by water. However, his relation with other bodies of water is measured by technical objects, demarcating the separation.

This is the contradiction of modern ontology, where nature and culture are separate poles, both measured by technology, although humans may be inseparably inserted into space and space into the human. Andrew Biro reminds us that humans are biologically bodies of water, residents in a space that is always a hydrographic basin, participants in a global hydrological cycle (Biro 2013: 175). On the other hand, the movement and presence of human and Gem intra-body waters remind us of the notion of trans-corporeality, which, according to Stacy Alaimo, presumes that the human and non-human bodies as disordered mixtures, contingents and emergents of the material world (Alaimo 2010: 11). According to Alaimo, the human body is always interconnected with the environment by being passed through and formed by non-human materialities, among them, water, toxic substances, bacteria, viruses, and other material elements also formed by water. The emphasis in many scenes of the episode “Ocean Gem (Part 2)” (1.26) is on the human and non-human body as being permeable and formed by water. Not only is water actively ingested when one is thirsty or mixed with food, but water is also present in its gaseous state in respiration and corporeal transpiration. Water also emerges as a common space for the materialization of the relations among different bodies.

Similar to bodies of water, each human and non-human is an ongoing materialization that shapes its difference from the other, even if its water is a common element in relation to other bodies. This condition is evident in the battle of the Crystal Gems with Lapis Lazuli in front of the large water

tower. Lapis feels the presence of Steven and the Crystal Gems and starts attacking them with water replicas. The powers of the replicas show themselves to be completely identical to those of the Crystal Gems. The difference is that the copies produced by Lapis Lazuli do not get hurt in the attacks: the water replicas dissolve and reshape themselves. Their bodies are more liquid and malleable than those of the Crystal Gems; they divide and unfold themselves in the air, and any attack against them shows itself to be useless. Even with these differences, Pearl blurts out how difficult it is to fight with herself. The Crystal Gems recognize themselves in the replicas, which are bodies without the limitations of the material and discursive interdependence with other, more solid forms that compose the bodies of humans and Gems.

This powerful hydrokinesis does not mean that Lapis Lazuli has power over the bodies of humans and Crystal Gems because they are also bodies made of water. Lapis is able to simulate bodies but cannot control the body of her target. Therefore, both Steven and the Crystal Gems recognize that they themselves are bodies made of water while maintaining a material and identity difference. This difference is only material and discursive time, occurring in relation to other bodies of water (although these bodies may be replicas). On the other hand, the replicas represent bodies whose identities are profoundly entangled with the space, making these forms more fluid and contingent.

The hydro-logic of differentiation formulated by Astrida Neimanis concerns the materialization and production of identity, which helps in thinking of the conditions of the characters as bodies of water in this scene (Neimanis 2013). According to Neimanis (2013: 31), despite the circular water in the planetary form, this circulation does not occur in a uniform manner, having differences in its constitution, movement and orientation in time and space. Bodies of water can be systems up to a certain point, given the examples of a lake, a river or even a protozoan. What differentiates them are the distinct flows and mixtures with other particles and substances, forming or gestating a closed system that communicates with other bodies by means of water with other emergent dynamics of circulation (Neimanis 2013: 31). The materiality of bodies made of water is therefore always emergent and relational, producing multiple differences in the continuum with the planet by means of the aqueous constitution of everything.

Differentiation goes beyond thinking of the world as an interactive connection; it also involves understanding bodies as permanent processes of conformation in an intra-action. Intra-

action was the conclusion reached by the feminist theorist Karen Barad in a dialogue with the ideas of Niels Bohr's quantum physics in regard to thinking of the scientific and social practices immersed in the universe of things. The intra-action comes from the presumption that bodies do not pre-exist in an independent form, with borders and inherent characteristics, but are the results of the primary relations that configure and reconfigure the limits and properties of the material itself, producing a difference in both material and discursive time (Barad 2003: 816). It is from the intra-actions that the separation and differences that place individuals, animals, and things in conditions of exteriority to one another emerge (Barad 2012: 77). All matter is similar to this, an ongoing historicity, and agency emerges as its very own reconfigurations, including time and space (Barad 2007: 179-80), mold the world. This condition of differentiation from intra-active processes seems more adequate for thinking of the relation among bodies of water in the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26).

The battle between Lapis Lazuli and the Crystal Gems finishes with Steven using his magic shield, making the replicas disappear. The boy demands a conversation with Lapis and is addressed. Different from the Crystal Gems, Lapis Lazuli does not want to follow the mission to protect humanity. She wishes to return to Homeworld and was using the ocean for this reason. Steven then reveals his curative powers. In the episode "An Indirect Kiss" (1.24), the boy discovers that his saliva cures humans and has the power to fix gemstones. It is the power that he inherited from his mother, Rose Quartz, who possessed curing tears. With his hands full of saliva, Steven touches Lapis Lazuli's gemstone, fixing it. After having formed the water wings on Lapis Lazuli's back, she flies to her home planet, and the water tower undoes itself in many gelatinous blocks that melt, forming the ocean again.

With the return of the ocean to its previous state, the economic activity in Beach City returns to normal, Bill Dewey's political project is saved, and the Crystal Gems return home. These circumstances emerge from the intra-active relationship among an aqueous substance, Steven's saliva, and Lapis's gemstone. Only Steven's secretion, in its condition as part of a

single system with its own relations born and inherited from his mother, could meet Lapis Lazuli's desires, another body made of water with hydrokinetic power. The limits between water and humans or between water and non-humans are completely imploded here, similarly to the dichotomies between nature and culture or between the environment and society. The dichotomies dissolve themselves in favor of a plurality of material-discursive forms both aqueous and transcorporeal on a common planet formed by water.

### 3. LAPIS LAZULI AND THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF WATERS

Lapis Lazuli is an alien who brings light to the complex meaning and feelings that emerge from the function of water in everyday life. There are a multitude of contradictory meanings that are situated from the experience of the characters' interaction with Lapis and her powers of hydrokinesis. The feelings generally involve the sublime, engendering postures very distinctly connected to perplexity, the terrible, melancholy, the marvelous, empathy, fragility, protection and fluidity in the dilution of borders. On the other hand, radically distinct visions of the commonalities of water emerge from Lapis Lazuli's positions in regard to herself and her own powers.

In the episode "The Message" (1.49), Greg reveals to Steven his new musical project, called "The Waterwitch". The cover of



FIGURE 3. SCREENSHOT FROM "THE MESSAGE", STEVEN UNIVERSE 1.49.

the CD is an image of Lapis Lazuli in front of the water tower (Figure 3). The events that occurred in “The Ocean Gem (Part 2)” (1.26) inspire Steven’s father to produce a song in a heavy metal style. A snippet of the lyrics of the musical theme of the CD reveals the idea of Lapis Lazuli that Greg had in that moment: “She’s a rip tide queen, and she’s so funny!”

Greg’s negative perception of Lapis Lazuli is justifiable; during the battle in front of the water tower, his car was destroyed, and his leg was broken. The waterwitch is therefore a cruel and terrible entity, almost causing the destruction of the world, inspiring a musical wonder with many guitar riffs, following a heavy vocal. The sublime in Lapis Lazuli’s powers acquires a feature of the terrible that now possesses connotations of cruelty and insanity and now promotes confusion and perplexity. In the third season, after Lapis Lazuli’s decision to reside on Earth, Steven invites her on a boat trip with Greg in the episode “Alone at Sea” (3.93). Even though Greg may be open to better understanding his past dislike of her, his discomfort is visible when she demonstrates her powers while fishing. Although Lapis Lazuli is no longer viewed as a threat, her powers still cause perplexity and fear due to the memory of what she did in the past.

In “The Message” (1.49), Lapis Lazuli shows her friendship with Steven by warning him of Homeworld’s plans to send an expedition to Earth. The Gem warns that Homeworld has become a terrible place, with extremely advanced technology based on its old standards and for the current human standards on Earth. This demonstration will not be sufficient to undo the distrust of the Crystal Gems in relation to Lapis Lazuli. When Lapis Lazuli decides to merge with Jasper to imprison her in the depths of the sea in “Jail Break (Part 2)” (1.52), in a moment of martyrdom, Garnet makes explicit her perception, emphasizing the cruelty of the act in itself in the context of the fusion, even though she also may have done so to save them. The Crystal Gems fear Lapis Lazuli due to her great powers and her unpredictable attitudes, which will give rise to a cautious posture when the water Gem later resides on planet Earth. There is also the perception that Lapis Lazuli blames the Crystal Gems for having her kept imprisoned in the mirror, helping in the maintenance of this distancing.

However, there is another possible interpretation of this distancing and fear. Lapis Lazuli represents “the other” in different aspects. She is the alien holder of an occult science that causes deep normative disturbances. She is “nature” because she is profoundly and intimately entangled with water in various levels. However, given both their material fluidity and material identity, her body, her powers and the water rep-

licas defy any static norm for bodies and identity identified with the material. As Gaard (2015) states, the ecofeminists point out that colonialism segregated individuals by race, gender, sexuality and other aspects, attributing them closely to “nature” but at the same time degrading the environment and accusing queer individuals of going against this same “nature” (Gaard 2015: 29). Lapis Lazuli represents the radical antithesis of this condition, being more associated “with the other” and “with nature” but at the same time profoundly going against the binary hegemonic and static categories of what is considered “human” and “natural”. To some extent, these binary notions still seem to be present, in a subtle form, in the thinking of the Crystal Gems and mainly in Greg’s human mentality.

Jasper will be another character who will have an extremely negative experience with Lapis Lazuli. The Crystal Gems were highly perplexed when the water Gem decided to merge with the villain Jasper to imprison her in the depths of the sea. This fusion, according to the creator Rebecca Sugar, represents an abusive relationship, extremely toxic, that creates a relationship of dependency between both of them that will last for some time, even after the separation (Asarch 2016). Malachite, the result of the fusion, is a gigantic creature, powerful, full of rage and misshapen due to her incessant fighting with herself in a mixture of contradictory desires that involve the desire for freedom and permanence. In the third season episode “Alone at Sea” (3.93), Jasper goes to implore Lapis Lazuli by resuming the fusion, after being separated since the episode “Super Watermelon Island” (1.79). Jasper creates a toxic emotional dependency on Lapis to the point of being humiliated by the return of Malachite. Jasper, however, warns Steven that Lapis Lazuli is a monster and that the boy should fear her above all else. This time, more than the contingent condition, Lapis’s character of extremely violent behavior is highlighted, enlarged in the metaphor of monstrosity.

Lapis Lazuli is a body made of water where extremes meet each other, and borders are diluted. Melancholy is a practically omnipresent trait in Lapis, contrasting her immense hydrokinetic power. This sentiment is intimately associated with her memory of home, with the references to the loss of Homeworld and to the suffering that she caused other beings with the manifestations of her powers. This existential dilemma made her fear herself and her powers (Asarch 2016). The memory of the catastrophic consequences of the ocean recession is constant. It is a melancholy that finds some parallel in what Mortimer-Sandilands (2010: 333) refers to as a continuous memory of the presence of death in the creation process, furthering the desire for and an ethic of preserva-

tion of different forms of existence. However, this constant reminder is not sufficient to placate her impulses. Lapis Lazuli is water, creation, and life but, at the same time, represents destruction and death, a condition that seems inescapable.

Lapis Lazuli's movements are generally calm, outlining the tranquility of a river that follows its tortuous course; however, her personality varies, mainly from the melancholy of calm lakes and crystalline waters to the indifference of a passing cloud and to the rage of a tsunami. This fluidity is another strong point in Lapis, and her appearance enhances the queer state of the Gems and the inversions of performed gender throughout the cartoon. Even with the extreme femininity of her body and clothes, Steven nicknames Lapis Lazuli "Bob" in the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), a diminutive form of the masculine name "Robert". Initially, the water Gem rejects the name given by Steven, but she seems to adopt it in the episode "Hit the Diamond" (3.83). On the other hand, Ottaway draws attention to the fact that Lapis Lazuli, with her fragile and feminine body, is the abuser in the relationship with Jasper, whose body is big, muscular and masculinized. In this case, for her, there is an evident deconstruction of the ideology surrounding the dynamics of power in relationships, where the masculine figure is portrayed as the only one that can abuse the female figure, given their corporal differences (Ottaway 2016). There is another evident condition in this case, which is water in its material form. Although viewed as a fragile degraded element by humans who think of themselves as the dominators of nature, it possesses an intrinsic force in their relation with the world, and hence must be respected. Therefore, Lapis Lazuli seems to incorporate the main characteristics of water, which are fluidity, the ability to change physical states and the ability to dissolve limits, making it possible to provoke reflections about gender and nature.

Other feelings, however, emerge in characters' relation with Lapis Lazuli. In the episode "The Message" (1.49), for example, Steven seeks to convince his father, Greg, of Lapis's motives for making the ocean recede. She is not malign, much less cruel, but a Gem who was imprisoned for thousands of years on Earth inside a mirror, against her will, and who only wanted to return home. The analysis of Lapis Lazuli that Steven performs comes from an experience of intimacy and affection with her, generating music in a melancholic tone:

She was trapped in a mirror,  
and it couldn't be clearer.  
She wanted to leave this place,  
and get herself back in space.

And dad you might think she's a criminal,  
but her friendship comes through subliminal.  
Lapis Lazuli,  
you fled into the bottom of the sea.  
Lapis Lazuli,  
you were so mad, but then you came around to me.

Steven wants to believe that Lapis Lazuli demonstrated feelings of affection and friendship. Not only does he desire to believe in the friendship, but he also wants to protect Lapis from the negative views and disapproval that emerged after the recession of the ocean. Despite the short amount of time, Steven's closeness with Lapis Lazuli was intense and connected to the sublime of the hydrokinetic movements. The intimacy with the magnitude of Lapis Lazuli's powers, the monumental form of the water constructed and her intense desire to return home does not provoke fear or perplexity but an enchantment and profound respect that intensified the desire to protect the Gem.

Lapis Lazuli is a metaphor for water that can also be understood in its relation to Peridot, who generates a completely different condition. Peridot belongs to a race of Gem scientists dedicated to the area of technology and to serving Homeworld, and she begins to have problems with the Crystal Gems when they try to fix the dimensional gates on Earth. She was responsible for Lapis Lazuli's imprisonment in Homeworld by Jasper, who was brought to Earth in the episode "The Return (Part 1)" (1.51) because she had knowledge about the planet and about the Crystal Gems. With the failure of Jasper's mission, Peridot decides to live on Earth in a barn that belongs to Greg's family. Peridot initially maintains very troubled relations with the Crystal Gems, given her feeling of superiority. She develops empathy for Lapis Lazuli because she is also a refugee from their home planet. Initially, Lapis behaves aggressively towards Peridot, rejecting any bond of friendship. However, with Steven's help, they both grow closer and decide to live together, spending their days caring for an immense corn and pumpkin farm and producing works of art.

It is possible to visualize the union between Lapis Lazuli and Peridot as the junction between water and the technical in the emergence of agriculture and the arts, two important aspects in human development. Peridot's treatment of Lapis Lazuli is very much connected to the notion of protection. Although her powers may be very limited compared to those of Lapis, it is evident that Peridot cares for the water Gem's well-being. This worry comes from two motives: Lapis Lazuli was the Gem who suffered the most in the series, having

been imprisoned in the mirror and, afterwards, in the depths of the sea with Jasper. On the other hand, Peridot is vain and considers herself to be mentally and emotionally superior to the other Gems. She possesses knowledge and mastery of technique, which is quintessentially the representation of science. Examining the history of the relations between the two, one can observe Peridot's dominance over Lapis in their relationship, with Jasper's mediation, in the beginning. Subsequently, there is a reconciliation, with a posture of otherness, where Peridot recognizes the importance of the water Gem for her life on Earth and continues to hold feelings of care. The last stage of coexistence between the two of them can easily be associated with science and the technical in communion with waters and in communion with the planet.

## CONCLUSION

Lapis Lazuli and her hydrokinetic power, with all the transgressions and strangeness that it promotes, offers the possibility to think of the waters in the constitution of humans, identities and relations in planetary space, suggesting a less anthropocentric and more relational view of the world. Lapis is the typical alien creature of the science fiction genre who says a great deal about who we are today while proposing future possibilities for thinking about the relationships among science, gender and the environment. In this sense, Lapis Lazuli is one of the main allies for ecofeminist and eco-queer analyses for promoting a more fluid view of gender while at the same time complicating relations among sexuality, politics and the environment by understanding them in a co-constitutive form.

Waters emerge from different forms in *Steven Universe*, with at least three highlighted aspects. The first is the political, which comes from the active participation of water in economic organization as well as social and cultural projects by being a co-constitutive element of the space where human business develops. The second aspect is linked to water as a conforming element of the human body, which links humans in affinity with all of the other beings who inhabit our planet. This corporeal affinity, however, is the connection that also makes evident the formation of material and identity differences through the distinctive rhythms and characteristics of beings as immersed bodies of water in an aqueous space. Finally, the most evident characteristic in the previous cases is the contingency of water, the difficulty of foreseeing its movements and having any kind of effective domain over it, the dramatic transformation that can operate on the lo-

cal and planetary level simultaneously, beyond the sublime aesthetic that helps in the dilution of borders, hierarchy and forms of domination.

On the other hand, Lapis Lazuli and her personality are confused with waters. Perhaps for this reason, she remains the alien whose intimacy with waters prompts anxieties that make her "the other" to be feared or the embodiment of untamed "nature". Her hydrokinetic power is constantly associated with destruction, with the unpredictable and even with evil. To a large extent, this condition is due to the normative instabilities that the abilities of water provoke in the foundations of modern thought. However, the presence of Lapis Lazuli also prompts dissent and debate over the nature of her powers and personality, notably opposing Steven and Peridot to the antipathy and fear that other characters have acquired.

The characteristics of the water detected in the narrative implode the binary ontology of humanism, the promoter of colonial forms of relation with the other. This points to a plural space of difference and suggests more horizontal forms of relationship between the inhabitants of the planet and waters. Thus, it is possible to state that Lapis Lazuli and her body, behavior and connection are a hydrological process where the eco-queer and posthumanist dimension flourishes in *Steven Universe*.

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## TV SERIES CITED

*Steven Universe* (2013-)

# SUBURRA. LA SERIE AS "PATRIMONIO INTERNAZIONALE / INTERNATIONAL PATRIMONY"

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## KEYWORDS

*Suburra. La serie*; Masculinity; Queer masculinity; Italian serial drama; Sympathetic perpetrators; Mafia.

## ABSTRACT

This essay investigates fascinations surrounding glamorized criminals by looking at how recent Italian history and queer bodies are represented, negotiated, and received in Italy's first made-for-Netflix series *Suburra. La serie* (2017-). In many ways, the series is a distinctly Italian production, especially in terms of the popular mafia-corruption plot that is based upon real life events. However, *Suburra. La serie* is a transnational production that engages viewers outside of Italy. This essay pays attention to the series' interesting marketing strategy that flagrantly draws attention to fictional/his-

torical consistencies, before addressing the physical allure and charisma of criminal antiheroes who appear trapped in a perpetual adolescence. Most importantly, I address how *Suburra. La serie*'s singularity as a transnational co-production allows for a unique representation of gender and sexuality on Italian small screens, as it marks an opening up of a mainstream space on the small screen to tell stories from the perspective of a non-normative sexual orientation. *Suburra. La serie* engages in a representation of queer masculinity that is distinctive in relation to Italian serial drama as a whole and especially in relation to serial dramas that depend upon sympathetic perpetrators to create relationships with viewers. As I argue, *Suburra. La serie* is a queer text with an address to viewers spanning continents, cultures, and languages.

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“Ostia, una Suburra vista mare / Ostia, Suburra with a sea view”. (Haver, “Ostia, una Suburra vista mare: Ormai sembra una Terra di nessuno”)

“Il fascino del male continua a conquistare il piccolo schermo / the allure of evil continues to conquer the small screen”. (Bigi, “Perché Suburra – la serie è più di un gangster story”)

“Suburra mixes *The Godfather* with *The Sopranos* for the queer generation”. (Reddish, “Meet Giacomo Ferrara, the adorable actor playing a closeted mobster in Netflix’s ‘Suburra’”)

## 1. INTRODUCTION: SYMPATHETIC PERPETRATORS

Dubbed the “Italian answer to *Narcos*” (Nguyen 2017), the entire first season of *Suburra. La serie* was available for download on October 6, 2017 on Netflix, which debuted in Italy in 2015. *Suburra. La serie* is Italy’s first made-for-Netflix series and is available for streaming to Netflix’s almost 110 million members in 190 countries (Netflix Media Center, 2017). *Suburra. La serie* is a prequel to the 2015 film (Stefano Sollima) and 2013 novel (Giovanni De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini), both entitled *Suburra* and both of which chronicle the church, state, and mafia involvement in 2011 in a corrupt development deal in the seaside town of Ostia, located thirty kilometers from Rome<sup>1</sup>. Spanning a twenty-one-day period in February and March, 2008, the series is a coming-of-age story focusing primarily on the exploits of three attractive young men who angle for their share of the profits in the nascent stages of the Ostia land and port deal. Leading antihero Aureliano Adami (Alessandro Borghi) is the son of a small-time gang leader who struggles with his semi-impotent father Tullio (Federico Tocci) and controlling and power-hungry

1 The film *Suburra* has received little critical attention. A notable exception is an intriguing essay by Dom Holdaway that discusses ten recent mafia movies in terms of production, performance, and distribution as relating the quality label (Holdaway 2016). Another unique take on the film and series is by Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni who note that the series is interesting in that it sheds light upon “new relationships among the various segments of the Italian cultural industries” while participating in a trend at work in Italian pay TV, that is the serialization of “models at once literary and cinematic”. They note that the film *Suburra* premiered in Italian theaters on October 14, two days before Netflix was launched in Italy. Thus, a very distinct marketing strategy. (Barra and Scaglioni 2016: 413).

sister Livia (Barbara Chichiarelli); Alberto “Spadino” Anacleti (Giacomo Ferrara) is in love with Aureliano and must repress his homosexuality from the members of his Sinti crime family, in particular his older, traditional brother Manfredi (Adamo Dioisi); and Gabriele “Lele” Marchilli is a middle-class son of a policeman who prefers dealing drugs and the Roman nightlife to his studies. All three are under the control of Roman mafia kingpin Samurai (Francesco Acquaroli) who is working to bring the Sicilian mafia into Rome through the Ostia port arrangement. Aureliano, Spadino, and Lele commit murder, deal drugs, manage sex work, and engage in extortion, and their involvement in such illicit acts leads to the death of several of those most dear to them. And yet, like many male protagonists gracing small Italian screens over the last ten years or so, they are represented in highly sympathetic terms. Indeed, in Italian television, gangsters and criminals are constructed to warrant our compassion in a much more straightforward manner than we have ever seen before. In particular, *Suburra. La serie* engages in a representation of queer masculinity that is distinctive in relation to Italian serial drama as a whole and especially in relation to serial dramas that depend upon sympathetic perpetrators to create relationships with viewers.

This essay investigates fascinations surrounding glamorized criminals by looking at how recent Italian history and queer bodies are represented, negotiated, and received in *Suburra. La serie*, both in Italy and internationally. In many ways, the series is a distinctly Italian production, especially in terms of the popular mafia-corruption plot that is based upon real life events. However, on par with – or even more so than – the smash hit *Gomorra. La serie* (*Gomorra. The Series*, 2014)<sup>2</sup>, *Suburra. La serie* is a transnational production that engages viewers outside of Italy. In what follows, I pay attention to the series’ interesting marketing strategy that flagrantly draws attention to fictional/historical consistencies, before moving on to address the physical allure and charisma of criminal antiheroes who appear trapped in a perpetual adolescence. Further, I address how *Suburra. La serie*’s singularity as a transnational co-production allows for a unique representation of gender and sexuality on Italian small screens, as it marks an opening up of a mainstream space on the small screen to tell stories from the perspective of a non-normative sexual orientation. As I will argue, *Suburra. La serie* is a queer text with an address to viewers spanning continents, cultures, and languages. Or, in the words of one reviewer,

2 *Gomorra. La serie* is now in its third season with show rites purchased in over 190 countries (Sky Atlantic HD 2017).



‘Suburra mixes *The Godfather* with *The Sopranos* for the queer generation’ (Reddish 2017).

## 2. SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

The sections that follow are indebted to social network analysis, in particular promotional posts by Netflix on the social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, and fan reactions to these posts. Also analyzed are fan videos and blogging sites that endorse *Suburra. La serie*’s queer position. The established field of Social Network Analysis allows scholars to look towards social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to discover social relations between individuals and groups, and to assess how interactions on social media effect or exert an impact upon ‘social behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge’ (Prell 2012: 1) As social network scholars note, social networks tie together individuals or organizations, and are of essential significance to contemporary society in their ability to exert influences over all aspects of daily life, including labor, emotional ties, and recreational pursuits (Fu, Luo, and Boos 2017: 5). Further, new media technologies are essential for their ability to enable connections between ‘queer members of diasporic communities’ by enabling cyber community users to engender novel spaces where they can make their voices heard. Thus, new identities are established that develop simultaneously as cyberspaces develop (Atay 2015: 2), and new media technologies can empower encounters between queer members of social networking communities. My analysis of social networks is also indebted to Judith Halberstam’s concept of “the queer art of failure”, in particular with regards to how the subversive in popular culture can present alternatives to dominant heteronormative culture. To this end, my taking into account posts about and reactions to the queer content in *Suburra. La serie* turns towards “low theory” in order to seek out “counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture and in relation to queer lives, gender, and sexuality” (Halberstam 2011: 19).

## 3. “SUBURRA VS. REALITY”

The book, film, and series are very loosely based on the “Mafia Capitale” scandals that rocked the Italy when they were unveiled in 2014, and pointed towards an intricate web of mafia-church-state corruption in the nation’s capital dating to at least 2000. Many who have written on the film and the book note affinities between fact and fiction, such as

similarities between historical and fictional “bad guys” (such as Samurai’s resemblance to Roman mafia legend Massimo Carminati), Pope Benedict XVI’s resigning from office, the fall of then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s government, elaborate parties involving politicians and prostitutes, and emergent criminal gangs in the Eternal City<sup>3</sup>. As one reviewer writes, “sembra di veder animarsi le pagine dei giornali con l’elenco degli scandali che hanno colpito di più l’opinione pubblica / it’s like watching the newspapers come to life with all of the scandals that captured the public eye” (Mereghetti 2015). One publicity stunt for the film involved promoting a building project called “Ostia Waterfront” that promised to transform Ostia into an Italian Las Vegas by 2017. The pseudo-advertising campaign involved a website ([www.ostiawaterfront.it](http://www.ostiawaterfront.it)) and a truck adorned with billboards and accompanied by scantily clad women passing out flyers advertising the hoped-for beachside revolution (De Santis 2015). The promo was met with public scandal, in particular on the Facebook Page of the group “Roma fa schifo / Rome is disgusting” which is part of a platform that allows for disgruntled citizens to voice discontent regarding the governmental mismanagement, collusion, criminality, corruption, and degradation apparently rife in Rome (Facebook 2015a).

Since Mafia Capitale made the headlines over three years ago, it is not uncommon to read news accounts of gang activity in and around Ostia. For example, during the month following *Suburra. La serie*’s release, news outlets reported on topics that include police sweeps in Ostia so as to prevent mafia turf wars in late November (The Local 2017) or the 6 November violent assault by Roberto Spada – of the notorious Spada organized crime family – on an RAI journalist in broad daylight during a taped interview (Fiano 2017). The Sky series and miniseries *Romanzo criminale. La serie* (2008-2010), *Faccia d’angelo* (*Angel Face*, 2012), and *Gomorra. La serie* met with much controversy due to what was felt by victims groups, politicians, neighborhood coalitions, and other stakeholders to be these programs’ representation of criminality through the eyes of alluring wrongdoers who might lead viewers down the wrong path<sup>4</sup>. Unlike its filmic predecessor,

3 For debates around the film *Suburra*’s factual accuracy, see, for example, Mereghetti (2015), Romani (2015), and Nextquotidiano (2015). The latter’s title reads, “Quanto somiglia Suburra a Mafia Capitale / How much does Suburra resemble Mafia Capitale?” Massimo Razzi (2015) notes the surprising similarities between the 2013 novel and the events surrounding Mafia Capitale that were not made public until the following year.

4 Such criticisms on these programs are plentiful. To cite a few examples, the victims’ group *Vittime del Dovere* denounced *Faccia d’angelo* as they claim that the

this is not the case for the Netflix production, even though the series features good-looking criminals whose infiltration into the Vatican and national politics must resonate amongst Italian viewers, many of whom are surely aware of the mafia's stronghold in Rome.

What might account for this dramatic difference in reception? One simple explanation involves Netflix's relative popularity in Italy. Although subscriptions are on the upswing with 800,000 reported on the day of *Suburra. La serie*'s release of October 6, 2017 (Filippetti 2017), membership pales in comparison with that of premium pay network Sky, which boasts close to five million subscribers (Bayre 2017)<sup>5</sup>. And of these 800,000 subscribers to Netflix in Italy (or Netflix's 110 million global users), it is impossible to know many actually watch the series, as Netflix, like other streaming providers Amazon and Hulu, keeps such ratings data to themselves (Koblin 2017)<sup>6</sup>. Also, as of writing, it is still early in the game, and it is possible that further coverage through reviews, critical essays, and fan blogs, coupled with the recent announcements of a guaranteed second season and talk of a third, might bring greater attention to the series, possibly resulting in greater scrutiny (Leonardi 2017).

As it stands, the coverage I have encountered (and there is not much) that links contemporary criminality with the series is almost lackadaisical in tone, and straightforwardly mentions that the series is inspired by real-life events: “Ostia, una Suburra vista mare / Ostia, Suburra with a sea view” (Haver 2017); “The growing lawlessness in the Roman municipality inspired the plotline for the Netflix series *Suburra*” (Nadeau 2017); or “Ostia come Suburra, la zona malfamata cuore dell'Urbe televisiva piena di bordelli e bettole poco raccomandabili / Ostia like Suburra, the infamous area of the television capital full of disreputable brothels and dives”

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miniseries is interested in making a profit off real lives lost and demonstrates a lack of respect for victims and their families while urging young spectators down the path of crime. The *Faccia d'angelo* letter queries, “ma cosa può succedere se una persona fragile assiste a tale mitizzazione di personaggi negativi, o se lo spettatore è un adolescente, persona immatura / but what could happen if someone who is fragile watches this mythologization of negative characters, or if the viewer is an adolescent, or immature” and points out that baby gangs (gangs composed of young kids) watch *Vallanzasca*, *Uno bianco*, and *Il capo dei capi*, texts which are “capaci di caricarli e motivarli prima della consumazione del reato / capable of psyching them up and motivating them before they commit a crime” (Piantadosi 2012). On the “morality” of *Romanzo criminale: la serie*, and a discussion of the controversy surrounding “negative role models” in the series, see Boni (2014: 31-5). For a take on the many polemics surrounding representing history in *Gomorra. La serie* see Renga (2016).

5 As of June 30, 2017, Sky reports 4.78 million subscribers (Bayre 2017).

6 For more on the “Netflix Effect” as relating to consumption, marketing, media convergence, and constructed audiences, see McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2016).

(Haver 2017), a statement which directly links the oceanside neighborhood with the lower-class ancient Roman suburb “Subura” known for its red light district. Such an anti-critical tone mirrors the resigned reactions that local residents have to elevated crime in the area. For example, one woman flatly notes that local youth enter organized crime as these networks offer the only viable option for getting by (Nafeau 2017). This attitude stands in juxtaposition to the calls for arms voiced by detractors of *Gomorra. La serie*, where protesters are primarily concerned with how the series might equate several Campanian cities with the camorra, or are infuriated that Roberto Saviano, author of the book *Gomorra* (2006) and co-creator of *Gomorra. La serie*, might be getting rich off the criminal organization while exploiting the residents of Naples and Scampia<sup>7</sup>.

*Suburra. La serie* is also conspicuous from the much-debated Sky counterparts *Romanzo criminale. La serie*, *Faccia d'angelo*, and *Gomorra. La serie* for its explicit narrative focus on church and state corruption. While it is clear that gangsters enter into affairs with politicians, the police, or an array of legitimate businesses in these other programs, their narratives focus principally on the lives and loves of gangsters. (In *Gomorra. La serie*, for example, politicians and agents of the law figure little, if at all, in the majority of episodes, and in *Faccia d'angelo* police investigators are represented as upstanding citizens consumed with bringing the protagonist to justice.) Instead, the narrative of *Suburra. La serie* is divided between the triumvirate's romances, bromances, and criminal endeavors, and the flagrant venalities at work in the Vatican and in parliament. This narrative focus is clear in the storyline of Amadeo Cinaglia (Filippo Nigro), a seemingly incorruptible left-wing politician who, without much prodding, goes into business with Samurai. Thus, Aureliano, Spadino, and Lele are cast as the lesser evils when set against a crooked national body.

Further, *Gomorra. La serie* is about the city of Scampia, and directly engages stakeholders who respond quite negatively and vehemently to what is perceived as a negative representation of the city. On the contrary, most of *Suburra. La serie* that relates to the criminal trio is shot in nonspecific locations, and the depiction of criminality is more directly associated with church (the Vatican) and state (several political offices). Also, *Romanzo criminale. La serie* witnessed a publicity campaign around the slogan “il crimine paga / crime pays” that enraged constituencies and provoked protest. A

7 For more on the protests surrounding the series and Saviano's involvement in it, see Renga (2016: 287-9).

series of four posters appeared in cities throughout Italy that featured the faces of Freddo, Libanese, Dandi, and Patrizia. To the right of each appeared the wording “io ho rubato / I stole” (Freddo), “io ho ammazzato / I killed” (Libanese), “io ho spacciato / I dealt drugs” (Dandi), and “mi sono venduta / I sold myself” (Patrizia), with “il crimine paga” featuring under the wording “Romanzo criminale la serie”<sup>8</sup>.

Those behind the creation and promotion of *Suburra. La serie* do not appear concerned about any polemics that might result from the series’ perceived mimetic take on daily life, and instead make the most out of recent malfeasant developments in the capital. Leading up to the October 6, 2017 release of *Suburra. La serie*, Netflix launched a publicity campaign on Twitter and Facebook that blatantly foregrounded the parallels between the subject of the fiction and contemporary, real-life events in and around Rome. On October 4, both networking services featured the game “Suburra vs.

Reality”. “La realtà dei fatti spesso è più sconcertante della finzione / The reality of events is often more disconcerting than fiction” proclaims the post that challenges fans to discern whether a set of five newspaper headlines correspond to “Suburra” or “la Realtà”. Stories – of which there are about twenty or so to choose from – involve the arrest of corrupt politicians, gangland fights, homicides, suicides, the discovery of the bodies of a priest and an “uomo asiatico / Asian man”, drug trafficking, prostitution, the arrest of two Sinti men, and homeless camps around the Vatican (Facebook 2017c). Based upon the score received (zero to five correct), players receive derisive, encouraging, or congratulatory messages from leading antiheroes Aureliano and Spadino, who look out towards and speak directly to viewers – with a perfect score, Aureliano exclaims “Bravo, tu sai come si amministra Roma / Well done, you know how Rome is run”, while with only two correct, Spadino scoffs “non hai voluto fare le cose con calma / you didn’t want to take your time!”

In addition to the game, the Twitter page includes several tweets prompting users to reflect upon topics that include

8 Three of these posters – of Libanese, Freddo, and Patrizia – can be found online at “Il crimine paga” (2010).



FIGURE 1. SUBURRA. LA SERIE VS. REALITY

the history of Rome, contemporary politics, corruption in church and state, and local mafia activity and arrests – one post from the day before the series’ premiere references a contemporary article in the leading newspaper *La Repubblica* that includes the tagline “Ostia laboratorio politico-criminale / Ostia political-criminal laboratory” (Angeli 2017) while another from September 28 links to an article about the arrest for money laundering of a member of the Roman mafia the Banda della Magliana (La Repubblica 2017). Interestingly, these posts are not included on the much more popular Facebook page, which might hint that the network is being cautious regarding marketing strategies with a potential backlash – as of December 27, 2017 the official Twitter page @SuburraNetflix has only 1,977 followers (Twitter 2017a) compared with the Facebook page’s 37,847 followers on the same day (Facebook 2017b). Many debates have ensued on social media and blogging sites surrounding what many feel is a glamorized representation of the Roman criminal gang the Banda della Magliana in the *Romanzo criminale* series, and found that users have conflicted, and even angry, reactions to content that equates historical fact and fiction (Renga 2017). It is interesting that protests against both Facebook and Twitter posts *Suburra. La serie* that present the villains of *Suburra. La serie* as alluring, or which conflate real-life events with the series’ fiction, are nonexistent. Rather than voice concern about the dangers of casting perpetrators in a fascinating light, users comment on Borghi’s beauty and Spadino’s dance moves, or they encourage friends to watch and comment on the series, commend it for a job well-done, debate its merits or criticize the subtitling. Also, they laud the actors’ abilities, express a desire for a second season, ask advice as to where to purchase Aureliano’s sunglasses, worry that the series might act as a spoiler for the film. Or, as I discuss in detail later, enthusiastically discuss the obvious chemistry between Aureliano and Spadino.

One commenter remarks under the “Suburra vs. reality” post, “la realtà ha da tempo superato l’immaginazione / for a while now, reality has surpassed the imagination” (enric0.v, October 4, 2017, comment on Twitter 2017b). This straightforward tone is also apparent across the reception of the series, fan interactions with web-based content, and the coverage of recent criminal events in Rome and Ostia. Unlike the 2015 film, the Netflix series has (as yet) sidestepped the protests surrounding other popular, recent series and miniseries with a criminal focus, all the while featuring Spadino, an attractive, queer protagonist who is not reduced to a cliché, punished, or alienated from the narrative. Indeed, *Suburra.*

*La serie* has “rivoluziona[to] la tv / revolutionized tv” in Italy in more ways than one (Pasquini 2017).

#### 4. “THE ALLURE OF EVIL”

*Suburra. La serie*’s leading bad men Aureliano, Spadino, and Lele add to the influx of sympathetic perpetrators – criminals, mobsters, corrupt politicians – who have flooded small Italian screens over the last ten years or so on the networks RAI, Mediaset, and Sky.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting however, that, unlike in the American model, the majority of Italian serial televisual offenders in central roles are conventionally attractive<sup>10</sup>. As Jason Mittell notes, with the exception of Jon Hamm’s Don Draper from *Mad Men* (2007-2015), the charisma of “[Tony] Soprano or [Vic] Mackey [from *The Shield*] shines through despite, rather than because of, their appearance” (Mittell 2010). This is not the case in Italian series focusing on criminal antiheroes, where good looks are the rule and not the exception (one review of *Suburra. La serie* underlines that all of the men on the show are “incredibly handsome”, extolling to viewers “seriously, take a look at these hunks” (Collins 2017). The choice to craft arresting antiheroes contributes to their criminal allure while offering an intriguing take on discourses surrounding the crisis of masculinity so prominent in contemporary screen studies scholarship<sup>11</sup>. Further, while the narratives of most American productions such as *House of Cards* (2013-) or *Dexter* (2006-2013) are (with a few exceptions)

9 Take, for example, the Sky series and miniseries *Romanzo criminale. La serie, Faccia d’angelo, Gomorra. La serie*, and *1992 and 1993* (2015-); the Mediaset programs *L’onore e il rispetto* (*Honor and Respect*, 2006 -2017), *Il capo dei capi*, 2007), and *Il clan dei camorristi* (*The Camorra Clan*, 2013); or the RAI series *L’ultimo dei Corleonesi* (*The Last of the Corleonesi*, 2007), all of which feature villains played by conventionally attractive actors.

10 One clear exception is *True Blood*’s Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) and Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgard). Attractive televisual vampires are on the rise these days, and good looks is a standard for the vampire genre, and this quality adds to their allure. In her study of vampire fiction, Ananya Mukherjea notes that recent incarnations of vampires are “fantastically flawless” (Mukherjea 2011: 12) while Ruth La Ferla points out that recent onscreen vampires have never before “looked so sultry – or camera ready [...] Bela Lugosi they are not” (La Ferla 2009). Another anomaly is Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) from the ensemble series *Game of Thrones* (2011-). However, he does not occupy the central role of narrative action as happens with the American criminal offenders discussed above.

11 Catherine O’Rawe’s *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* offers the most thorough and thought-provoking treatment of onscreen crisis masculinity in the Italian context. See in particular pp. 1-10 of the introduction, chapters 1, 2, and 3, and the afterward (O’Rawe 2014). Also in the Italian context see Sergio Rigoletto, *Masculinity and Italian Cinema: Sexual Politics, Social Conflict, and Male Crisis in the 1970s* (2014).

purely fictional, this is not the case in the Italy where the bulk of more recent Italian series are based upon historical figures and actual organized crime networks or important, real-life events<sup>12</sup>. Italian television programs featuring beautiful criminal antiheroes are growing rapidly in popularity on public, private, and pay networks and platforms. That several recent Italian television series are available internationally on the Sundance Channel, Hulu, and Netflix, and can be purchased and rented on iTunes and Amazon, speaks to their transnational appeal and growing fan base. It's fascinating that spectators enjoy re-experiencing Italy's painful recent history in the safety and comfort of their own homes, in visually pleasurable forms that invite compulsive viewing habits. In the Italian tradition, good looks, while adding to the allure of leading bad men, heighten interest in Italian television programs precisely because their narratives are anchored in the Italian present or recent past.

One reviewer writes, “Suburra è un’esperienza traumatica in una realtà che non vorremmo conoscere ma dalla quale non riusciamo a distogliere lo sguardo / Suburra is a traumatic experience in a reality that we would not like to experience, but that we cannot look away from” (Ahlen 2017). Such a statement gets to the heart of film and television scholarship on why viewers take pleasure in virtual relationships with fictional characters who, were they to show up at our doors, would terrify many of us, and push us to call the police. This is especially the case in Italy where a daily look at the newspaper reveals stories of corruption, clan wars, raids, drug busts and homicides, all mafia related, and which resonate with the narrative of, for example, *Suburra. La serie*. Discussed as “perverse allegiances” (Smith 1999), “sympathy for the devil” (Carrol 2004), “appealing, attractive murderer[s]” (Smith 2011), or “sympathetic allegiance [with] antiheroes” (García 2016: 70), focal antiheroes who are endowed with qualities that elicit viewer alignment are abundant in contemporary serial television programming.

Take, for example, Aureliano Adami, a key member of the gangster trio in *Suburra. La serie*, and who is the main character in the book and film. The Adami family misfit is played by Alessandro Borghi who is called “The Italian Brad Pitt” (Proietti 2016) and was chosen to be the first man to act as the “host” of the 2017 Venice Film Festival, an honor typically awarded to an Italian actress who is dubbed the “madrina / sponsor”. Borghi is described by many bloggers and reviewers as a “sex symbol”

12 American exceptions include *Deadwood* (2004-2006) and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014) which include characters based upon historical figures.



FIGURE 2. AURELIANO ADAMI, ANGEL OF EVIL

who comes off as a “James Bond all’italiana / Italian James Bond” (Abbiadati 2017). The rising star is the center of much media attention around the series and is featured prominently on *Suburra. La serie*'s Facebook and Twitter pages, where he or his fictional counterpart Aureliano have a more prominent presence than the other characters/actors involved in the series<sup>13</sup>. Some images and short videos accentuate Aureliano's dark side. For example, one post warns users to “Mai porgere l'altra guancia / Never turn the other cheek”, as Aureliano gazes seductively out towards viewers while in a super-imposed video he violently beats a rival to death. Posts also feature the following: jokes about his speedy driving, tongue in cheek how-to lessons that instruct users on how reach his “Zen” condition, warnings about never getting on his bad side, a feature on the “Aureliano Adami state of mind”, or a short video called “legami/ties” where he is shown playing with his beloved dog

13 As of December 8, 2017, seven Facebook posts are dedicated solely to Aureliano. Also, Aureliano (or Borghi) is the face of the leading image on five other posts that contain a series of individual images (such as red-carpet debuts or composites of lead characters). Further, the cover photo of the trio positions Aureliano squarely in center as is the case with the Twitter header photo (although the image is different). Conversely, Spadino is the focus of five individual posts, two dedicated to his criminal allure, and three less serious posts that discuss dissing, his dancing prowess, and table etiquette. Lele is featured on one post (Facebook 2017b).

(Facebook 2017b). User reactions to these videos are uniformly positive and enthusiastic, which makes sense insofar as the Facebook page is “liked” by a community of fans.

Aureliano Adami is a consummate example of a sympathetic perpetrator, and he is endowed with many of the characteristics that render likeable the various “hideous men” (Mittell 2014) omnipresent on small screens as of late. In *Engaging Characters*, Murray Smith underlines the processes by which viewers engage with villainous characters so as to judge them positively or negatively. The “structure of sympathy” is composed of three “levels of engagement”, which Smith calls recognition, alignment, and allegiance, components all produced by narration. The first, recognition, refers to how viewers construct characters, connect all of the dots and character traits outlined in the section above and recognize them as distinct “textual constructs” and not masses of attributes (Smith 1995: 82-83). Once we have understood characters as such, we align with them when we are given access to “their actions, and to what they know and feel”. In this way, we are privy to a lot of what they experience, and we see them interact at work, at home, with their friends, and on their own (Smith 1995: 83-4). Allegiance is the most important element for creating viewer sympathy. Audiences are able to “morally evaluate” characters only once they feel they have “reliable access to character’s state of mind” and understand what led to characters to act as they do (Smith 1995: 84). Viewers then can then form opinions about and possibly relate to characters and are complicit in their choices, whether morally sound or sordid.

Viewers might align with and feel allegiance for Aureliano for several reasons, even though he is a hard-core criminal who maims and murders many, and exhibits particular violence when killing Spadino’s cousin and his girlfriend’s pimp, and even murders his good friend Lele’s father. First off, we get to know Aureliano quite well, as we see him in several spaces and contexts: at the gym while boxing, swimming or brooding alone, playing with his dog at the beach, arguing with his sister and father, developing intimate friendships with Lele and Spadino and rivalries with Samurai and Sara Monaschi (Claudia Gerini), who works for the Vatican and is manipulated by several key players in the Ostia deal. Although he is spoken about by his father and Samurai as the least adept of the Adami siblings, he is positioned as the clear leader of the trio and is physically fit and clever in his criminal enterprises (although not incredibly successful), and he moves up the chain of command by the end of the season when Samurai accepts his position and cuts him in on the deal. He also falls in love

with Isabelle (Lorena Cesarini), a prostitute from Senegal who, in a very stereotypical fashion, he attempts to rescue but cannot as she is murdered by his vindictive sister Livia. Isabelle’s death endows Aureliano with further pathos while vilifying Livia. Further, he has a compelling backstory that marks him as a tragic figure – his mother died giving birth to him, and his father resents him as a result. Like most recent televisual anti-heroes such as Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos*, 1999-2007) or Ciriaco De Muro (Marco D’Amore, *Gomorra. La serie*), Aureliano has father issues, and endeavors to take his father’s place so that he can come-of-age in the streets on his own terms. Perhaps most importantly, Aureliano struggles with his criminal dark side, and unlike Samurai, Manfredi Anacleti, or his sister, is not at ease harming or murdering people who he feels do not deserve it. (He even refuses to abandon his dog, even though keeping the animal makes him vulnerable as it ties him to a murder.) Aureliano suffers over and over again: he cries, looks bereft, and experiences what is best described as existential angst when confronted with what he feels is his solitary position in life. In the words of Jessica Page Morrell, “here is the trick with creating anti-heroes: They always possess an underlying pathos” (2014: 143).

As do many actors, Borghi is involved in the dissemination of story-lines about his character that might engage viewers and push them to consider the complexity of Aureliano’s persona. The rising Italian star recounts to an interviewer that *Suburra. La serie* is not interested in just showing the “lati cattivi / negative sides” and “aspetti brutti / ugly aspects” of characters, but instead strives to narrate a “momento di umanità / moment of humanity” that frequently (and paradoxically) is juxtaposed with violent scenes (Vitali 2017). However, Giacomo Ferrara (who plays Spadino) disagrees with Borghi, and hopes that viewers will have a more Manichean reaction to *Suburra. La serie*’s the series’ characters, and will be disgusted by them (“facciano schifo”), and not follow in their footsteps (Fumarola 2017). Such responses by those involved in the production of programs featuring glamorized representations of criminality are common, as actors, showrunners, creators, or producers work to preempt debates and polemics potentially spurred by what victims, activists, or average citizens might perceive as irresponsible representations of alluring delinquents<sup>14</sup>. In the same interview however, Ferrara discusses the difficulties of interpreting Spadino

14 For example, Roberto Saviano advocates for *Gomorra. La serie*’s “realism” and foregrounds the series’ ethical dimension that might push viewers towards engagement in the antimafia struggle (Renga 2016: 289).

without transforming him into a “macchietta / caricature” and notes that he worked hard to make the character nuanced, a move that counters Ferrara’s earlier statement regarding the loathsome quality of the characters in the series (Fumarola 2017). In many ways Spadino is quite nuanced, and, as I will now discuss, engenders the first gay sympathetic perpetrator in a central role in the Italian small screen tradition.

## 5. “MEET THE FAIRY GODFATHER”

Before *Suburra. La serie*, Italian premium serial television was reluctant to feature gay or queer characters, and any minor gay characters are represented as stereotyped, closeted, under-developed, or their perceived “deviant” behaviors resulted in their being ostracized or killed off (and this is the case, with few exceptions, for mainstream Italian television)<sup>15</sup>. For example, in *Romanzo criminale. La serie* the only openly gay character, Ranocchia, has a minor role and is bullied by main male protagonist Dandi; he also develops a fatal illness that Catherine O’Rawe notes is “coded as AIDS” and speaks to an “anxiety about contamination” running throughout the series (O’Rawe 2014: 131). *1992/1993* introduces a few minor gay characters, some with HIV/AIDS, and one closeted politician representing the extreme right regionalist and federalist Northern League, whose sexual dalliance result in his being blackmailed. The series focuses, however, on a white, straight character named Luca, who contracts HIV because he is unknowingly exposed to tainted blood; he is represented as a martyr figure whose suffering is foregrounded. Finally, one episode of each of *Gomorra. La serie*’s first two seasons focuses on a different transgender character, both of whom are quite developed. In the end, however, one character named Luca is murdered and the other called Nina is publicly shamed and then abandoned before being left to suffer in melancholy. Conversely, *Suburra. La serie* is genuinely interested in exploring the complexities of what it means to be gay if “sei

l’erede di una famiglia mafiosa in ascesa / you are the heir to a rising mafia family” (Corsi 2017)<sup>16</sup>.

The character of Spadino in *Suburra. La serie* is a sui generis queer protagonist in the Italian small screen tradition, both in terms of his representation within the series and how he is marketed and received extra-diegetically. Viewers learn that Spadino is gay early on in the first episode (“21 Days”, 1.01), when he speaks unhappily with his mother about his impending arranged marriage with Angelica (Carlotta Antonelli), the daughter of another Sinti clan boss. To console him, she tells him in Sinti: “I know what you are. I understand”. He asks her what that is. “What you are,” she replies, “whatever you are, you can’t be that here, in this house, in this family. You can’t.” For the first time in the series, we get the melodramatic theme music that will serve as a motif underlining the sadness, longing, and distress frequently felt by Aureliano, Spadino, and Lele, and is heard in particular when Aureliano and Spadino feel bereft about the direction in which their lives are heading. The second time we hear the music, for example, is two minutes later when Spadino drives to a gay cruising area, but cannot bring himself to pick up a man who – with his piercing eyes and bleached blond hair – strikingly resembles Aureliano.

The representation of Spadino is “Totalmente lontano dai soliti cliché LGBT a cui la televisione italiana ha spesso abituato i suoi spettatori / completely distant from the typical LGBT clichés that Italian television frequently accustoms viewers” (Boni 2017). *Suburra. La serie* makes overt its queer themes from the beginning, and each episode develops Spadino’s storyline. In particular, across the first four episodes, Spadino’s angst at having to live in the closet is obvious, as is his discomfort with the arranged marriage and his developing attraction towards Aureliano, the chemistry between the two men increasing with every episode. The focus of “The She-Wolf” (1.05) is the gauche wedding ceremony complete with a mock-up of the Trevi Fountain which is followed by Spadino’s unwillingness to consummate the marriage (he instead cuts his arm with a dagger to simulate the virginal blood on the sheets).

15 Andrea Jelardi and Giordano Bassetti’s *Queer TV: Omosessualità e trasgressione nella televisione italiana* offers the most comprehensive overview of the representation of gay and queer characters in Italian television through the mid-2000s. The authors note that although more gay characters feature on Italian screens in the 1990s and 2000s, for the most part, and with minor exceptions, they are stereotyped and have minor roles (Jelardi and Bassetti 2006). Luca Malici authored an enthralling study of audience reception to the heightened visibility of GLBT individuals on Italian television in the 1990s and 2000s. Akin to Jelardi and Bassetti, Malici notes that although the “televisibility” of GLBT characters has “increased exponentially” in Italy, such representations are “problematic in terms of both quality and quantity” (Malici 2014: 189).

16 *Suburra. La serie* is a queer text not only due to its focus on a gay gangster. For one, the beach in Ostia, the location of the violent murder of Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1975, is a central space of homosocial bonding and mourning for Lele, Spadino, and Aureliano. In her writings on the film and series *Romanzo criminale*, Catherine O’Rawe discusses the beach as an “exclusively homosocial space” that is haunted by the nostalgic yearning for an impossible “recuperation of a group masculinity” (O’Rawe 2014: 101-2). Similarly, in *Suburra. La serie*, while at the beach male characters revel in their arrested development, choosing friends over girlfriends, and thus forestalling (as long as possible) the entrance into adulthood. Such gestures recall Halberstam’s discussion of an “extended adolescence of nonreproductive queer subcultural participants that [...] offers alternative life narratives” (Halberstam 2005: 175).



FIGURE 3. SPADINO'S PATHOS

In “Garlic, Oil, and Chili Pepper” (1.06) the homoerotic nature of the Spadino-Aureliano relationship is made manifest as the pair takes a road trip during which they further bond while relaxing in a thermal hot spring where they rub mud on one another’s backs (this episode is a favorite with fans who “ship” or “root for” / “believe in” the Spadino/Aureliano relationship, as I discuss later). In the following two episodes, Spadino is ever more frustrated with his forced union until Angelica spies on him while he meets with Aureliano and she easily guesses that her husband is in love with a man, at which point she attempts to blackmail him, telling him that she will keep his secret if he impregnates her. In the penultimate episode “Pitch Black” (1.09), Spadino’s euphoria at having finally stood up to his family leads him to kiss Aureliano who then turns on Spadino, and insults him with homophobic slurs. In the final episode “Call It Sleep” (1.10), Spadino comes into his own, takes over his family, and has sex with Angelica so as to maintain his pater familias status. This scene is particularly touching as Angelica gently assists helps Spadino have sex with her, as he grimaces and is patently discomfited. In their final confrontation, Spadino does not kill Aureliano when he has the chance (nor does Aureliano kill Spadino when he has

a clear shot). Spadino tells his friend that he knows who he is and does not have to prove anything to anyone, as he is a “zingaro e un froc\*\* / a gypsy and a fa\*\*\*t”. Spadino’s narrative concludes when he confidently picks up the Aureliano-doppelganger prostitute and drives off in his luxury car<sup>17</sup>.

Like Aureliano, Spadino is presented as a compassionate and complex figure. (The same is also true of Lele, but to a lesser extent, as he is given less screen time.) Aureliano’s ill deeds pale in comparison with those of his two friends, each of whom, for example, murders the other’s father. Born into a family that will never accept him, he struggles with filial ascension and is set up in contrast with his older brother Manfredi, who is cruel, unsympathetic, lecherous, and follows antiquated patriarchal customs. For example, before Spadino meets his betrothed, Manfredi forces him to kill a sheep, a violent and outdated ritual with which Spadino is clearly at odds<sup>18</sup>. Unlike Aureliano and Lele, Spadino does not commit murder and refuses to “be a man” in the way his mother orders, instead preferring to spend his time playing and plotting with his friends, or in his club dancing. One reviewer notes that Spadino’s “joyous, snake-hipped” dancing marks “his only true moments of freedom” (Feay 2017). I would add to this his intimate bonding with Aureliano, his affinity for music, or his day in the city center with Angelica where they disrupt diners at a five-star restaurant in Rome’s most affluent shopping district and gleefully run off without paying their tab<sup>19</sup>. Like his criminal counterparts, Spadino suffers profoundly and openly weeps. All this, coupled with his charisma and good looks, endow him with pathos and prompt viewers to respond positively towards him.

Reactions to Spadino and the Spadino/Aureliano coupling in reviews, blog sites, and in comments to Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube posts are plentiful and consistently positive, and speak to the “participatory culture” of online communities (Jenkins et. al. 2009):

17 Many reviewers and fans comment on the manifest gayness of the series, for example Emanuel Amabilis who lists the “10 momenti più gay di Suburra / 10 gayest moments in Suburra” (Amabilis 2017).

18 The representation of the Sinti families in the series is quite stereotypical. For specifics, see Carradori (2017).

19 This scene seems inspired from Francesca Comencini’s *Una giornata speciale* (A Special Day, 2012) where the two youthful main protagonists steal a dress from a posh designer shop Via dei Condotti and run off into the crowd (Angelica and Spadino are in the same area). Danielle Hipkins offers an intriguing reading of this scene in the Comencini film in terms of “lines of flight” that, citing the work of Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold, disrupt “normative, oppressive boundaries of (working-class) femininity” (Hipkins 2016: 30). With this scene, *Suburra. La serie* critiques “normative oppressive boundaries of” heteronormativity.



bellissimo! Adoro questi due, non ci sono parole per descrivere quanto li ami. Spadino è il primo personaggio gay che si distacca dalla classica figura caricaturale e parodistica a cui ci ha abituato la televisione italiana, e merita, merita un sacco [...] spero che gli autori saranno coraggiosi abbastanza da continuare ad approfondire la loro relazione e magari, chissà, a regalarci anche mezza gioia.

beautiful! I adore these two, there are no words to describe how much I love them. Spadino is the first gay character who is distanced from the classic caricatured and parodic figure that Italian television has gotten us used to, and this really, really means something [...] I hope that the authors will be courageous enough to continue to deepen their relationship and maybe, who knows, gift us with a little happiness. (User comment to BloodlessAgain 2017)

In un mondo fatto di machismo a go-go come quello dei malavitosi, suona ironico e sicuramente soddisfacente che sia proprio un personaggio gay ad essere il *più uomo*. Spadino, infatti, è quello che più di tutti gli altri realizza un percorso di maturazione e affermazione complete [...] Adesso abbiamo un mafioso gay intelligente e incasinato quanto quello etero, felice e triste quanto quello etero e, secondo le limitanti logiche di genere di questi mondi, *maschio* come la controparte eterosessuale.

In the super macho criminal world, it sounds ironic and surely satisfying that it is precisely a gay character who is the *most manly*. In fact, Spadino, more than anyone else, realizes a complete journey of maturation and affirmation. Now we have a mafioso who is as gay intelligent and screwed up as a straight mafioso, as happy and sad as a straight mafioso, and, according to the limiting gender logic of this world, as *masculine* as his heterosexual counterpart. (Romano 2017)

“Meet the fairy godfather” is the tagline of an English-language review that lauds the Netflix series for putting forward a “sexy, stylish gay mobster” who is the craftiest of the triad and is “more gangster” possibly due to his “double minority status” (Reddish 2017) as both Sinti and gay, a position that leads him to develop survival skills that allow him to get

ahead, and even thrive, in seemingly impossible circumstances. In terms of character complexity and allure, Spadino gives onscreen white male criminal figures such as Tony Soprano, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), and Ciriaco De Marco a run for their money<sup>20</sup>.

Netflix is not at all shy in drawing attention to Spadino’s sexuality and to the erotic nature of the Spadino/Aureliano relationship. For example, on October 21, 2017 Netflix posted a video called “Gira voce che Anacleti e Adami stanno a fa’ impicci / Word is spreading that Anacleti and Adami are getting into trouble” to the official Twitter and Facebook sites. The forty-eight second video is composed of eighteen Spadino/Aureliano moments, the majority of which we see the pair laugh, bond, look meaningfully at one another, enjoy a plate of pasta or soak in a thermal hot spring. In a few other clips, Spadino breaks down or wistfully smells Aureliano’s sweater, and in one moment Aureliano lies in bed with his girlfriend. The post is accompanied by the love song *It’s You* by Martha

20 Fans on official Netflix sites privilege Spadino to Aureliano. After the trailer and the Aureliano/Spadino post I discuss in the following paragraph, the two most popular Facebook posts in terms of “likes”, “shares”, and “comments” are devoted to Spadino / Ferrara (Facebook 2017b).



FIGURE 4. MALE BONDING



FIGURE 5: “THE COUPLE OF THE YEAR”

Bean and Chris Lewis that is on the soundtrack to Netflix’s first Spanish original series *Las chicas del cable / Cable Girls*, a period drama set in the 1920s that focuses on female bonding and has queer themes, and which develops intimate relationships between key female protagonists<sup>21</sup>. In this way, the *Suburra. La serie* video has a transnational appeal. The series’ address to viewers across the globe who are attracted to queer programming might also be heightened considering that Spadino is the second gay criminal character featured in a 2017 Netflix production, the first being the openly gay and powerful drug

21 The series has a vast fan-base, and many fans have created videos, blogs, and websites devoted to the Carlotta/Sara coupling (for one example of many, see the Tumblr blog “carlotasara”).

trafficker Helmer “Pacho” Herrera in the American Netflix production *Narcos*, a character who is “revolutionizing what it means to be a powerful gay man” (Friedlander 2017).

At the same time, the video speaks to a national fan-base by including quotations from the Twitter posts of four fans, which read:

“Patrimonio internazionale / International patrimony” @lifewithbi

“La coppia dell’anno / The couple of the year” @pearsephona

“Romeo e giulietta chi? / Romeo and Juliet who?” @pinkplumcake

“Shippo Aureliano e Spadino e non mi pento di niente / I ship Aureliano and Spadino and I do not at all feel badly about it” @Helactras<sup>22</sup>

Of the more than fifty posts on the Facebook site (as of the time of writing) the Spadino/Aureliano post is the third most popular in terms of “likes” (more than 4000) and fourth most favored according to “shares” (almost 500) and “comments” (all 695 of which are affirmative). Such contributions by the network promote a form of what Jason Mittell calls “forensic fandom that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of the story and its telling” (Mittell no date)<sup>23</sup>.

Netflix’s advertising campaign regarding the Spadino/Aureliano coupling might imply that the service is attempting to gain access to, in Suzanne Danuta Walters’ words, the “gay market” which is a “commodity” ready to be exploited for capitalist profit (Walters 2001: 254). However, the queer response to the series emphasizes an “unsettling of the mainstream” that

22 Each of the original posts are easily found with a Twitter search.

23 Admirers of the series and the Aureliano/Spadino storyline have created their own videos and web pages promoting the relationship, such as the remediated YouTube video “Aureliano + Spadino shining lights are placed in the dark” by BloodlessAgain (2017). These paratexts enlarge the original series, reaching broad audiences with diverse viewing preferences. In the words of Marta Boni, such paratexts, “perform operations which reframe the experience of the fictional universe, adapted to the times and contexts in which they appear” (Boni 2014: 111).

is central to the project of queer television studies (Joyrich 2014: 133). Lynne Joyrich argues that television queerness can be both reactionary and progressive, both “the electrical spark and the grounding against any possible shock”. This paradox is at play in *Suburra. La serie* as the Spadino storyline marks a “piccola rivoluzione / small revolution” (Romano 2017) in the representation of LGBT characters in Italian small screen programming, even though his popularity is most certainly bolstered by his association with a series of routine conventions used in Sky programs to represent criminal antiheroes (i.e. they are attractive, glamorous, white, and engage in deep bromances). Concomitantly, *Suburra. La serie* engages international viewers who turn to streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime – both of which have developed a significant reputation for producing serial dramas featuring sympathetic LGBT characters (i.e. Netflix’s *Sense8*, 2015-2018, and Amazon Prime’s *Transparent*, 2014-).

With *Suburra. La serie*, Netflix uses dependable production and marketing strategies to hook a sizable international viewership. Such tactics do not negate the series’ potential as a queer text. Alexander Doty notes, “queer reception (and production) practices can include everything from the reactionary to the radical to the indeterminate”. Queer reception is anti-essentializing (someone might identify to one’s family or friends one way, yet “queerly experience” a media product in quite a different fashion) (Doty 1993: 15). Sara Ahmed points out that while compulsory heterosexuality is socially comfortable (and is structured around weddings, childbirth, labor, death), it is by no means mandatory. She argues that when queer bodies push against “narratives of ideal heterosexuality” (Ahmed 2014: 146) there is a potential to rework the heteronormative. She writes: “The hope of queer is that the reshaping of bodies through the enjoyment of what or who has been barred can ‘impress’ differently upon the surfaces of social space, creating the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple”. Thus, queer can be highly revolutionary when positioned nearby heteronormativity, and the “hope of queer politics” involves transformed modes of being with others (Ahmed 2014: 165). The representation of Spadino, and the circulation and reception of the queer Spadino/Aureliano videos, both official and fan-based, certainly endorse such a progressive position.

## 6. CONCLUSION: “BRUTAL MASCULINITY”

In the Italian mainstream television tradition, *Suburra. La serie*’s representation of a gay male character is revolutionary.

With its overt queer subtext, *Suburra. La serie* is pioneering in the representation of sex and gender on Italian small screens and appeals to viewers inside and outside of Italy. At the same time, the focus on the homosocial exploits of a criminal band of brothers who attempt to make it big in Rome against a larger political and criminal backdrop might draw in, for example, fans of the Sky hit series *Romanzo criminale*, the majority of whom reside within the nation’s borders. The queer position that the series promotes, however, comes at the expense (as per usual) of women, almost all of whom are represented in problematic terms and are not put forward as characters that prompt audience alignment. With regards to the treatment of women in the Sollima film, Danielle Hipkins astutely points out how, “Quite different to the knowing and playfully extended boyhood of male characters, the preoccupation with female youth in Italian cinema gives us the disposable girl corpse of *Suburra*” (Hipkins 2017: 271). Although female characters in the series are more developed and have greater screen time and increased positions of power than the few women in the film (most of whom are prostitutes and one drug-addled girlfriend), all female characters in the series are represented as power hungry, vindictive, manipulative, or compliant to the men around them<sup>24</sup>. To cite two examples among many, the only woman of color in the series is Aureliano’s girlfriend Isabelle who works as a prostitute, returns to Aureliano over and over again regardless of how poorly he treats her, and is murdered by Livia. Livia, like many of the women in the series, is coded as selfish and conniving and thus beneath the moral code of her criminal male counterparts. As a measure of her depths, Livia cold-heartedly kills Aureliano’s dog and orders her lover’s murder.

It is interesting that the only woman put forth as a positive figure is Aureliano’s mother, who we never meet as she has been dead for a few decades. Instead, as is common in contemporary quality programming, the father/son bond, and all of its nuances (becoming the father, growing up differently than the father, rebelling against the father, killing off the father) drives the story forward. As is frequently the case in male melodrama, the diverse crises experienced by youthful male protagonists are narratively central and further assist in rendering these men likable to viewers. To cite an extreme case, even Aureliano’s overt homophobia is packaged as potential-

24 For a compelling collection of essays treating criminal antiheroines in television, please see Milly Buonanno, ed. *Television Antiheroines: Women Behaving Badly in Crime and Prison Drama*. Margaret Tally notes that audiences view female antiheroines as “unlikable to varying degrees” which is not the case with male antiheroes who come off as sympathetic to viewers (Tally 2016: 7).

ly excusable when he is depicted as despondently mourning the close bond with his friend Spadino. Even though the two straight characters Lele and Spadino have love interests, the connections privileged by the series are those between men, and these “brutal masculinit[ies]” (Feay 2017), bromances, and homosocial bonds are cast as the most compelling relationships, which – according to the thousands of fan blogs and posts that I consulted – engage gay, straight, lesbian, and bisexual audiences internationally. In this way, @lifewithbi’s post “Aureliano + Spadino patrimonio internazionale!!” is telling. The etymology of “patrimony” relates to “social organization defined by male dominance or relationship through the male line” (Oxford English Dictionary). In *Suburra. La serie*, male power and patrilineal succession are front and center, regardless of who is looking at, and liking, who.



FIGURE 6. “INTERNATIONAL PATRIMONY” AND *SUBURRA. LA SERIE*’S TRANSNATIONAL ADDRESS

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