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# (Dis)Enchanted: (Re)constructing Love and Creating Community in the

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(Dis)Enchanted: (Re)constructing Love and Creating  
Community in the *Once Upon a Time* Queer Fandom

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated very sincerely to Justine Egner—with eternal appreciation for her continued focus and determination when helping me talk through my thoughts and for telling me to “get the damn thing done, already”.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Previous Literature .....	4
Compulsory Heterosexuality .....	5
Identity and representation in media .....	7
Media Studies.....	7
Queer Media Studies.....	8
Queerbaiting.....	9
Queer Readings .....	10
Lesbian Readings .....	11
Fandom Studies .....	13
Establishing Queer Fandom.....	14
III. Methodology.....	16
Tumblr as a platform and queer fandom practices .....	16
Time Frame and Data Collection .....	18
Methodology, Framework, and IRB.....	19
Assumptions/My own biases and reflexivity: .....	20
IV. Findings.....	21
Research Question 1: Redefining Fairytales?.....	21
(1) Developing Counter Narratives of “True Love” .....	25
(2) Shipping Swan Queen .....	28
Reasons For Shipping Swan Queen .....	30
(3) The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the “True Love” Narrative.....	34
Research Question 2: A Queer Fandom’s Importance and Their Goals for Intervention .....	35
(1) Queerbaiting and its Implications for Queer Fans .....	36
(2) “Dangerous” heterosexist storylines .....	38
(3) Gaslighting .....	42
(4) Experiences of Queerphobic Antagonism and Violence.....	44
V. Discussion.....	50
Queer Theory and Queer Fandom .....	52
“Fantagonism” .....	54
Queer Melancholy: What Queer Fandom Offers Us.....	55
VI. Conclusion: Reclaiming Their Own Space and Striving for a Queer “Happily Ever After” .....	57

Scope and Limitations of the Research .....	58
Works Cited.....	61
Appendix A.....	65
Appendix B.....	66

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a queer fan community for the television show *Once Upon a Time* (*OUAT*) that utilizes the social networking site Tumblr as their primary base of fan activity. The Swan Queen fan community is comprised of individuals that collectively support and celebrate a non-canon romantic relationship between two of the female lead characters of the show rather than the canonic, heterocentric relationships that occur between the two women and their respective male love interests. I answer two research questions in this study: First, how are members of the Swan Queen fan community developing counter narratives of love by engaging in meaning-making processes and interpretations of *OUAT*? And secondly, how do they talk about the purpose and importance of their narratives for themselves or the Swan Queen fan community? In order to answer my research questions, I consider how the Swan Queen fandom developed and how they convey their meaning-making strategies online. To do this, I have analyzed the Tumblr blog of one Swan Queen fan and have used their blog as a nexus between other Swan Queen fans that use the website for their fan activities. Swan Queen fans argue that the show runners of *OUAT* use subtextual codes within canonical storylines in an effort to queerbait the show's queer audience members. Moreover, the show runners refute the notion that they are queerbating queer fans at all by arguing that the fans' perceptions are baseless and that any perceived queering of the characters Emma Swan and Regina Mills is purely "unintentional." This response has only served to alienate the show's queer fan base further as it led to increased complaints that the show

runners were gaslighting the entire queer fandom. Additionally, Swan Queen fans maintain that the show's introduction of canonical storylines featuring romantic relationships between Regina and Robin Hood and Emma and Captain Hook are heterosexist and dangerous. The storylines between Emma and Captain Hook, queer fans argue, often promote rape culture, thus perpetuating violence against both queer and non-queer audiences through storylines grounded in fairytale concepts of "True Love" and "Happily Ever After". As such, Swan Queen fans push back against and reject this violence through their own interpretations and counter narratives of "True Love". In accordance with previous research, I have found that historically marginalized groups such as the queer community continue to experience widespread and often aggressive attacks by queerphobic individuals and hate groups that are intent on preserving traditionally heterocentric institutions in our society, including (but not limited to) mainstream media broadcasting. Furthermore, fandom has become institutionalized in the same manner and typically operates within hegemonic, heterocentric standards. Conversely, queer fandoms such as the Swan Queen fandom operate outside of these standards, and fans respond to antagonistic efforts to silence them or cast them in an inaccurate manner by creating close-knit social communities to combat these actions and provide a space wherein individuals are able to counter dominant narratives that serve to further marginalize them. This study elucidates how this effort may occur and questions the effect this membership has on those who participate within a queer fandom. It is imperative that such research takes place, as there are very few accounts of how queer fans navigate the complex intersection between fandom and queerness.



## I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines a queer fan<sup>1</sup> community of the television show *Once Upon a Time* (*OUAT*; ABC) that utilizes the social networking site Tumblr as their base of fan activity. This fandom community is referred to as the “Swan Queen” fandom and is comprised of individuals who collectively support and celebrate a non-canon romantic relationship between the two female lead characters of the show (Regina and Emma) rather than the canonic, heterocentric relationships that occur in *OUAT*’s storylines. Specifically, I analyzed the Tumblr blog of one Swan Queen fan, wittyoncer<sup>2</sup>. Using their blog as a nexus between Swan Queen fans, I analyzed text posts from wittyoncer as well as their reblogs from other members in the queer fandom community, to which they added their own thoughts and perceptions, thus developing a running and continuous dialogue.

Swan Queen fans argue that the show runners of *OUAT* use subtextual codes within canonical storylines in an effort to queerbait the show’s queer audience members (e.g. intentionally produce media content that is ambiguous and can then be read queerly that draws increased viewership from queer fans; this is discussed in more detail in Previous Literature). Moreover, the show runners refute the notion that they are queerbating queer fans at all by arguing that the fans’ perceptions of being queerbaited are baseless and that any perceived queering of the characters Emma Swan and Regina Mills is purely “unintentional.” This response

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the terms “queer fans” and “queer fandom” are both in reference to the fans of the Swan Queen fandom that I focus my research on from Tumblr, specifically. Additionally, my usage of the term “queer” is defined and operationalized as falling outside of the rigid and categorical boundaries of heterosexuality (Doty, 1993; Edelman, 1994; Halperin, 1995; Jagose, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The blog name “wittyoncer” is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the Tumblr blog’s author. Additionally, the name “wittyoncer” is available for use here because it is unclaimed on Tumblr.

has only served to alienate the show's queer fan base further as it led to increased complaints that the show runners were gaslighting the entire queer fandom. Additionally, Swan Queen fans maintain that the show's introduction of canonical storylines featuring romantic relationships between Regina and Robin Hood and Emma and Captain Hook are heterosexist and dangerous. The storylines between Emma and Captain Hook, queer fans argue, often promote rape culture, thus perpetuating violence against both queer and non-queer audiences through storylines grounded in fairytale concepts of "True Love" and "Happily Ever After." As such, Swan Queen fans push back against and reject this violence through their own interpretations and counter narratives of "True Love."

Rationale and Significance of Study:

I answer two research questions in this study: First, how are members of the Swan Queen fan community developing counter narratives of love by engaging in meaning-making processes and interpretations of *OUAT*? And secondly, how do they talk about the purpose and importance of their narratives for themselves or the Swan Queen fan community?

The significance of this work is, I contend, that historically marginalized groups such as the queer community continue to experience widespread and often aggressive attacks by queerphobic individuals and hate groups that are intent on preserving traditionally heterocentric institutions in our society, including (but not limited to) mainstream media broadcasting. Furthermore, fandom has become institutionalized in the same manner and typically operates within hegemonic heterocentric standards. Conversely, queer fandoms such as the Swan Queen fandom operate outside of these standards, and fans respond to antagonistic efforts to silence them or cast them in an inaccurate manner by creating close-knit social communities to combat these actions and provide a space wherein individuals are able to counter dominant narratives

that serve to further marginalize them. This study elucidates how this effort may occur and questions the effect this membership has on those who participate within a queer fandom. It is imperative that such research takes place, as there are very few accounts of how queer fans navigate the complex intersection between fandom and queerness.

In order to answer my research questions, I consider how the Swan Queen fandom developed and how they convey their meaning-making strategies. Swan Queen fans are a community based on similar interpretations of *OUAT* and a commitment to developing counter narratives to the show's heterocentric "True Love" narrative. Members of the Swan Queen fandom who interact on Tumblr may not come from homogenous backgrounds and may not share all of the same types of experiences in life but they do share some, as evident in their similar interpretations of the show and comparable expressions of counter narratives. Moreover, these fans are of particular interest because of their critiques, meta-analyses, and personal experiences within a multi-character, fantasy-based fandom where inclusivity and gate-keeping occur depending on factors such as favorite character, favorite character pairing, or—more tangibly—age, sex, gender, race, sexuality, or any combination therein.

It is these particular actions and interactions by Swan Queen fans that fascinate me. Fandom, Jenkins explains, is nurtured internally and individualistically but transitions into a collective passion that individuals navigate constantly, (Jenkins, 2012). One individual post or reaction to queer-phobic harassment garners immediate attention and support from others within the queer fandom, as the post becomes accessible and viewable as soon as one posts. With this immediacy, it has become clear that online interactions and online fandoms such as the Swan Queen fandom are deeply committed to each other as well as the fandom itself.

## II. PREVIOUS LITERATURE

This thesis addresses queer fandom engagement with *Once Upon a Time* and Swan Queen fans' responses (via an online platform) to the show's continued lack of queer representation in favor of perpetuating heterosexist notions of "True Love" and fairytale romance. Researchers from a wide variety of fields including media studies, feminist and queer theory studies, LGBTQ+ studies, fandom culture studies, and online communication studies have taken up media representation as a topic of study.

I begin this literature review by examining the way in which Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality (1980) is beneficial to an interrogation of hegemonic notions of love and romantic partnership in relation to the concept of "True Love" as it is understood in *OUAT*. I will then examine the previous literature on media representation and marginalization. Gaye Tuchman's notion of symbolic annihilation (1981) proves useful, here, as it provides a foundational concept for much of the literature written on media representation and marginalization. I move on to literature on identity and media representation in order to reestablish scholars' contention that there is still a lack of LGBTQ+ representation that is positive and more complex (e.g. non-tokenizing) in order to introduce queer media studies as an important site of research in queer and lesbian reading practices (Doty, 1993; 2001; Wilton, 1995; Dobson & Young, 2001). I end with literature on fandom studies (Jenkins, 1992 and 2012) and how fandom has changed with the constant introduction of new technologies that make communicating with each other easier and more convenient (Renninger, 2015).

## **Compulsory Heterosexuality**

Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980/2003), as a concept, is ideal for this project and features greatly in my framework of analysis for the notion of “True Love” as contextualized in *OUAT*. The concept itself is one that acknowledges society's ideological demand of heterosexuality in all institutional and/or social settings. Lesbianism, thus, is devalued or erased from the history of humankind—any and all queerness, as well. In the introduction to the 2003 re-publication of *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Rich asserts that resistance to heterosexual culture and ideological oppression is key: “resistance is a major theme in this essay and in the study of women’s lives” (Rich, 2003, pp. 12).

Rich explains her concerns about the reasons why women's choice of women as romantic partners (“comrades,” even), has been rejected or repudiated, thus leading lesbians to hide their desires or remain closeted their whole lives. One of Rich's stronger arguments is that feminist theory needs to address and critique the societal demand for a compulsory heterosexual orientation for women. By doing this, she argues, all women will benefit (rather than just lesbians) because a deconstruction of gendered expectations and marginalization is needed in order to reconfigure feminism (Rich, 2003, pp.13). Rich refers to the Western institution of heterosexuality itself as “a beachhead of male dominance” (pp. 13). She goes on to suggest that heterosexuality needs to be studied as a political institution (pp. 17). Perhaps the part of the essay that is most impactful is when Rich presents and augments Gough's (1971) research on the characteristics of power routinely held by men, especially highlighting the section regarding denying women [their own] sexuality (pp.18). Rich uses brackets to impart her own additions and thoughts to Gough's work throughout this section, including the brief mention of “pseudo-lesbian images in the media and literature” (pp. 18). Furthermore, Rich explains that the forms by which male power exist and are manifested in society only strengthen the idea for women that

they must fall in love with men and marry and have children (pp. 20). Also of importance, she mentions the erasure of lesbian existence and the way in which the exception to this is if such lesbian representation is perverse and, as such, oriented for the male audience (pp. 20).

Rich states that early indoctrination in “love” as an emotion to be valued and pursued by young girls may be a Western concept but that a more universalizing ideology of the power and importance of the male sex drive should be addressed in conjunction with the former (pp. 24).

Perhaps the most succinct expression of Rich's argument comes from Rich, herself:

“The assumption that “most women are innately heterosexual” stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism. It remains a tenable assumption partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and “innately” heterosexual” (pp. 27).

All this is to say that heterosexuality has been imposed on women in multiple ways, forcefully and tangentially, but also emotionally, subliminally, and institutionally (Rich, pp. 30). Furthermore, Rich’s contributions to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality have inspired many scholars’ keen insights on boundary making. For example, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed makes the argument that compulsory heterosexuality determines which bodies can successfully or “legitimately” approach would-be lovers and which bodies cannot (Ahmed, pp. 145). This type of boundary making and marginalization is, of course, within the purview of those imbedded within a heterodominant society that operates through the reproduction of hegemonic standards.

## **Identity and representation in media**

### ***Media Studies***

Identity and representation in media has been a broad topic of interest for many media studies scholars over the past three decades and I am specifically concerned here with works on the importance of representation (Gerbner, 1970), depictions of women in media (Tuchman, 1981), and LGBT representation (Doty, 1993; Wilton, 1995; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2002; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Perhaps one of the most beneficial concepts concerning media representation is Gaye Tuchman's 1981 article entitled "Women's Depiction in the Media". The discussion shares examples in which mainstream media corporations leading up through the mid-twentieth century actively and purposefully portrayed men (both fictional and non-fictional) as dominant figures while women were portrayed more "traditionally" or, sometimes, not at all (Tuchman, 1981). The information most pertinent to the research at hand concerns the actual presence of women, as detailed in the title of the article itself. The presence of women on television programs lent to perpetuating stereotypes that were largely harmful to the burgeoning women's liberation movement (Tuchman 1981, pp. 12). This argument further develops the concept of symbolic annihilation of women in American culture and society (*ibid.*). The article acknowledges Gerbner's (1970) coinage of the term and contributions, "For, according to Gerbner, just as representation in the media signifies social existence, so too underrepresentation and (by extension) trivialization and condemnation indicate symbolic annihilation" (*ibid.*). Symbolic annihilation, then, is a term used to illustrate the lack of representation and/or underrepresentation of a specific group based on their identities (i.e. race, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.) in media, reinforcing and maintaining social inequality on a large-scale social basis. Tuchman's article closes with two dominant explanations of media's sexism: women's position in media organizations and the socioeconomic organization

of the media (Tuchman, pp.13). Of particular relevance, Tuchman provides us with a brief interrogation of television writers and the economics of television, stating “[f]or television writers, professionalism includes not offending the networks” (pp. 14). This observation is key in that it suggests that television writers must perform their jobs to the satisfaction of the network (and to those who dictate what is appropriate for television audiences), rather than the fans of the show themselves (both queer and non-queer, alike). What, then, can LGBTQ+ individuals do in response to this “business as usual” attitude in media that focuses purely on compulsory heterosexuality?

### ***Queer Media Studies***

Queer media studies scholars have long been interested in researching how a lack in media representation affects LGBTQ+ individuals’ overall engagement within a heterodominant society on a daily basis, theorizing that this continued lack of positive representation leads to further demoralization and marginalization of queer individuals (Doty, 1993; Wilton, 1995; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2002; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). In order to address these issues further and to reassert the importance of both identity and representation, it is beneficial to consider what is erased or made invisible in society (e.g. compulsory heterosexuality) and in media (e.g. symbolic annihilation) separately from how queer individuals read, resist, and create fandoms.

A review of queer media studies literature follows in order to reestablish the argument that LGBTQ+ fans of media do not “turn off” or separate from their identities when actively participating in fandom. Instead, they may incorporate their own lived experiences and personal narratives into the media content, itself, through engagement with plot lines, characters, and the relationships that said characters develop in a fictional world deconstructed and co-constructed to fit queer fans’ needs.



One of the goals of queer media is to challenge traditional beliefs and hegemonic practices (i.e. heteronormativity) in relation to media representation (Wilton, 1995, pp. 5). Indeed, popular and mainstream television shows began to feature openly gay and lesbian identifying characters such as Ellen DeGeneres' eponymous character from *Ellen* and Will Truman and Jack McFarland from *Will & Grace* (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). However, Raley and Lucas assert that much of this media representation is solely based on stereotypical portrayals of gay and lesbian attitudes, desires, and identity (2006). Additionally, the authors contend that the majority of LGBTQ+ characterization in media from the 20<sup>th</sup> century worked to normalize homosexuality and present gay and lesbian lifestyles humorously for heterosexual audiences, thus promoting homonormative behavior (Raley & Lucas, 2006). It is largely because of this contention that LGBTQ+ individuals seek more accurate and fully developed representation in media, today.

### ***Queerbaiting***

It is well documented that televisual media mirrors the social world and that this mirroring frequently occurs in the form of producing and reproducing heterosexist and heteronormative shows with predominantly cis-gender, white, straight male and female protagonists/main characters (Gross, 1994; Wilton, 1995; Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Jenkins, 2012). Therefore, these (re)productions of heterosexist and heteronormative narratives effectively minimize and silence any characters who identify as anything *but* cis-gender, white, and straight, effectively controlling who and what can be represented in media (Gerbner, 1979; Tuchman, 1981; Doty, 1993; Gross, 1994).

Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, issues surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media became central to both activists and scholars who questioned whether the continued lack of accurate (that is to say, non-stereotypical and non-tokenizing) portrayals of gay and lesbian characters was damaging to queer individuals' perceptions of self (Gross, 1994;

Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). The early 2000s presented viewers with a dynamically changing media atmosphere—an atmosphere that introduced characters who identified as gay and lesbian (and trans\*, in some instances) *and* lived full and rich fictional lives rather than being relegated to the annals of “very special episode” or created specifically to make fun of or warn audiences of the “homosexual lifestyle” (Gross, 1994; Raley & Lucas, 2006). The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents a more complicated situation regarding LGBT+ characters and representation. Indeed, there is a startling pattern within mainstream media that warrants further attention from scholars: queerbaiting.

Queerbaiting, or “multicasting” (Himberg, 2014), has become a fairly common tactic used in media, particularly in television shows, and has altered the viewing habits of queer and LGBT+ fans’ engagement with media. In this study, the term “queerbaiting” is preferable over “multicasting” as the act is discussed as such by Swan Queen fans on Tumblr. Queerbaiting is done intentionally to attract audience members to a television show that identify as queer and/or LGBT+ in order to gain their viewership (Brennan, 2016). Series creators queerbait queer and LGBT+ audiences with coded moments between two characters of the same gender, which can be (and are) then interpreted as queer. However, these coded-as-queer moments are rarely explicated or followed up with continued, canonized actions between the two characters. This perceived queerness, whether intentional or unintentional, may never become canon in the television series because the series’ creators do not wish to pursue the queer romance between their characters, as this may alienate the series’ heterosexual and/or homophobic fans. Additionally, any queering of a character, in a canonical sense, may be walked back by the creative team of the series (read: erased) in order to appease their straight and homophobic fans.

### **Queer Readings**

Academic interests in LGBTQ+ readings of popular media texts have grown rapidly since

the early 1990s yet much of the literature on these readings focuses on either queer readings (Doty, 1993; 2001) or lesbian readings (Wilton, 1995; Dobinson & Young, 2000). For example, Doty (1993) discusses and attends to queer positions, stating that they can be altered or modified over time as people, cultures, and politics change (1993, pp. 8). Rather than framing queer media studies as something to be studied from the outside, Doty promotes readings that are articulated from within queer discourse(s), built on and around personal queer perspectives on mass media/culture (pp. 7-8). Doty's stance on queer readings does not, it seems, categorize queer to mean only gay or lesbian self-identity. Rather, queer offers unending possibilities and opposition to heterosexism as an institution.

By approaching queer readings from a queer position, Doty also works in an effort to suggest that popular media genres such as horror, science fiction, and fantasy are active sites of “contrastraight” resistance, stating

...[E]veryone's pleasure in these genres is ‘perverse’, is queer, as much of it takes place within the space of the contraheterosexual and the contrastraight. Just how much everyone's pleasures in mass culture are part of this contrastraight, rather than strictly antistaight, space— just how queer our responses to cultural texts are so much of the time— is what I'd finally like this essay to suggest (Doty, 1993, pp. 15).

The acknowledgment of the concept that queer moments are received and perceived through the screen by viewers—regardless of the filmmaker's intent—is of importance. As such, Swan Queen fans' queer positions and queer readings of the fantasy show *Once Upon a Time*, its narrative, and its characters matter greatly.

### ***Lesbian Readings***

Lesbian media studies and readings, though, differ from queer ones in that they are both a part of queer media studies and separate from them. To appropriately examine this project, I

have had to take up both queer media studies and lesbian media studies and consider their similarities as well as their differences. Wilton takes up Doty's notion of queer positions/queer readings and further explains that the making of lesbian meaning is a "contested process" that is determined both by lesbian perceptions and non-lesbian ones (Wilton, 1995, pp. 5). Most strikingly, Wilton discusses lesbian readings and firmly states as fact that lesbians cannot separate themselves, or be separated from, their socio-political contexts (Wilton, 1995, pp. 13-14). While I agree with Wilton's argument, her specific focus on lesbian readings is largely located within a time and place in which identity politics broadly shaped academic conversations on the topic. I find it difficult to consider the Swan Queen community as a lesbian fandom rather than a queer fandom mainly because it could be that some community members do not choose to identify themselves as lesbians or within the LGBTQ+ moniker at all.

Previous research supports the concept that lesbians read texts or scenes (in the case of television and other visual media) through a "specific set of codes apparently undiscerned by other audiences" (Hinds, 1992, pp. 65; Doty, 1993; Wilton, 1995). These lesbian readings of texts are further positioned within academic scholarship thanks in large part to the work of Dobinson and Young (2000). The authors' research interrogates 20<sup>th</sup> century popular cinematic films and lesbian interpretive strategies in response to dominantly heterosocial and heterosexual media. This meaning making can be observed in the ways in which active lesbian audiences perceive scenes in media and relate them to experiences in their lives, "[R]ather, lesbian readings, and, therefore, interpretive communities, contain a degree of heterogeneity; their bearers bring unique personal experiences to reception that shape aspects of their responses in equally unique ways" (Dobinson & Young, 2000, pp. 100). These readings have been referred to as being "against the grain" (Dobinson & Young, pp. 101). The benefit in referring to lesbian

readings as “against the grain” is that it signals the fact that there is a distinct and oppositional strategy to that of the heterosocial reading. The authors continue, “[W]e were also interested in the way in which such strategies may grow out of and reciprocally impact broader social experiences. In other words, while our primary focus was the practice of making meaning, we were also concerned with how such practice is related to lesbian lives and forms of social stratification outside [the movie theatre]” (Dobinson & Young, pp. 105).

Dobinson and Young conclude that lesbians are active viewers of media that constantly excludes or otherwise stereotypes lesbian existence and that they form their own interpretation strategies of media that allows for a continuation in viewership (Dobinson & Young, 2000, pp. 98). Building off of the authors' conclusions, I examine what happens when Swan Queen fans of *OUAT* watch the show, interpret the medium's message, and engage in meaning-making processes that produce counter narratives to the show's notion of “True Love.” In so much as the way members of the Swan Queen fandom choose to identify themselves and each other, this fandom is a queer one. Whether they identify as lesbian or not, they belong to a queer fandom because the fandom and its active participants reject and oppose the show's hegemonic and mainstream narratives, as well as the fan culture built around these narratives, in an effort to illustrate how damaging the show's concept of “True Love” is for those who fall outside of the rigid category of cis-gender heterosexuality.

### **Fandom Studies**

Fandom can be best understood as a complex and dynamic process one navigates on a day-to-day basis. On an individual level, identifying as a fan and feeling a sense of belonging to a particular fandom allows for a deep and intimate affect to develop. Jenkins (2012) maintains that simply “being a fan of something” and calling oneself a fan and “claiming membership to a subculture” are separated by the act of meaning-making, as this act is “deeply social” (pp. xiv).

Thus, any individual fan engaging in the deeply social process of meaning making also belongs to a fandom community alongside others who engage in the same process. The idea of fandom as a community is not a new one and there is excellent research on the matter of both hegemonic fandoms and counterhegemonic fandoms (Penley, 1997; Grey, 2007; Bennett, 2010).

### ***Establishing Queer Fandom***

In addressing counterhegemonic fandoms, I find it useful and necessary to consider them as queer fandoms. Chad Bennett (2010) developed an understanding of the term “queer fandom” by linking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) ideas of queer existence, shame, and the inherent coexistence of both in queer lived experiences to Jenkins’ fandom theory (2012). As such, Bennett arrives at the conclusion that fandom is filled with levels of inherent shame and, ergo, there is “something queer about fandom in general” (Bennett 2010, 18-19). However, I do not agree completely with Bennett in regards to the significance of shame within queer fandom, as it is clear that fandom practices have changed with the shift in online presence and online practices via social network systems (Jenkins, 2012). This is a positive shift in that there are now many different ways to engage in online fandom participation, as opposed to the few available twenty years ago, when internet socializing first became popular. Thus, it is possible that Swan Queen fans, faced with little to no positive representation within mainstream media, have created online communities in which they feel safe to celebrate difference, co-create fan media (such as fan fiction, fan art, poetry, etc.), and collaborate with others in their community about fan theory, meta commentary, or critiques of their favorite show. By engaging in these processes, Swan Queen fans may experience a sense of belonging and bonding among their online cohort that they rarely feel in their daily lives, be it in school, at work, at home among family, or somewhere else within the social world.

*Online Community and Communication*

Bryce Renninger (2015) researches online community spaces used by asexual individuals, identifying theoretical and practical advantages and, more importantly, disadvantages to the use of Tumblr and reddit. Expanding upon boyd's (2011) explanations of SNSs (social networking sites) as networked publics, the author creates a model for further understanding the social dynamics within Tumblr and reddit—as they are unique examples of counterpublic communication among individuals who consider themselves outside of the dominant public sphere. Counterpublics, in Warner's perspective, are those that oppose *the* public, “a kind of total sociality” (Warner, 2002, pp. 49). Therefore, counterpublics enable individuals or groups to produce and disseminate alternative discourse narratives and directly counter the total (normative) sociality of hegemonic ideology.

Renninger (2015) works with and adapts Madinaou and Miller's (2013) theory of polymedia environment, using the example of counterpublic communication about asexuality identity among the online community spaces created on Tumblr and reddit. The focus of the article remains largely on the SNS Tumblr and details the way in which technological and technosocial affordances such as the “Ask Box” on Tumblr lend to “trolling” and animosity among members of different “parts” of Tumblr. The author chose to focus on Tumblr because it “was seen as a place for vibrant activity among asexuals” during research (Renninger, pp. 1515). Engaging with Fraser's research on subaltern counter publics (1990), Renninger contends that counterpublic communication among asexuals and asexual allies about asexuality serves two purposes: to work out ideas related to identity, community, and relationships and provide opportunity to develop tactics to assert and/or adapt identities within the large social sphere (pp. 1516).

### III. METHODOLOGY

I have focused my research on a community of queer fans of the show *OUAT* who have developed an online space via the website Tumblr to actively participate in their fandom. By doing so, they are able to further engage in creating counter narratives of love in response to the canonical heteronormative storylines, character representation, and romantic relationships said characters enter into. The goal of this research is to examine the ways in which Swan Queen fans alternatively interpret the text of the show using their own lived experiences and perspectives and engage in the process of creating their own sharable texts and media online that question or outright reject the dominant discourses of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality.

In order to discuss fandom participation, there must be an establishing ground for those who are not familiar with the show or the show's plot lines. ABC's hit television show, *Once Upon a Time*, is the re-imagining of classic fairy tales from Disney and other fictional worlds that take place in modern-day Maine, and follow the lives of such fabled fairy tale characters as Snow White and her Prince Charming, The Evil Queen, and many others (classic and contemporary) as well as original characters who become part of the story itself. The show premiered October 23, 2011, to high ratings and positive audience reception.

#### **Tumblr as a platform and queer fandom practices**

In order to accomplish this project, I employed a qualitative content analysis of data from a specific blog from the website Tumblr (Mitra, 2010). Tumblr is an ideal platform for study because of the variety of users on the website as well as the variety of ways in which the site can be customized to fit individual needs, wants, and desires (Zappavigna, 2013; Renninger, 2015,



pp. 1515-1516). Specific to the purposes of this project, Tumblr is useful to observe queer fandom practices. The website provides LGBTQ+ fans the space in which they can communicate their thoughts, reactions, and emotions about their fandom away from the rest of their social and public arenas of interaction, thus creating online queer counterpublics (Warner, 2002; Berlant & Warner, 2013).

Renninger (2015) states, “Counterpublic address allows those that lie outside of sanctioned publics to map their own ideologies, thoughts, and subjectivities among people, mostly strangers, that share an awareness of similar countercultural referents” (pp. 1526). Using this concept, it is possible to build upon Jenkins’ (1992/2012) research on fandom practices in order to show that Swan Queen fans use Tumblr to resist the dominant, hegemonic narratives presented through mainstream media that reproduce the tenets of Rich’s (1980/2003) compulsory heterosexuality.

The data comprise of blog posts and subsequent “reblogs” by the blogger wittyoncer. Wittyoncer is one of the most prominent members of the Swan Queen community and is an active participant within the Tumblr fandom. The blogger is a prolific fan media producer who participates by contributing fan fiction, fan theories, and meta commentaries. Furthermore, they are an active and engaging member of the SQ community largely because they interact and collaborate with other members by reblogging and commenting on other fans’ posts. Crucial to consider, as well, is the way that fans of Swan Queen interact with wittyoncer’s Tumblr posts. Their individual Tumblr blog posts can be considered to be a corpus of multiple discussions and communication threads, providing evidence of their specific popularity (Zappavigna, 2013). These interactions are critical to my analysis because they illustrate the ways in which online fandom members and groups communicate and strengthen relationships with one another

(Zappavigna, 2013). Wittyoncer has a blog that is open to public access, meaning that anyone can search their “name” online and access their Tumblr profile page and scroll through their past posts. There is also an option to search through their archived posts. Taken together, these factors and options were extremely useful tools for the type of qualitative, textual analysis of this project.

### **Time Frame and Data Collection**

Rather than directing my data collection towards *OUAT*'s overall broadcast history and airtime, I focus my attention towards a particular “jumping-off” point during seasons three and four (2013-14), wherein the character of Killian Jones, alias “Captain Hook,” is introduced as the new love interest for Emma Swan and Robin Hood is introduced as the love interest of Regina Mills/The Evil Queen. Thus, I looked at wittyoncer’s blog posts that coincide with these plot lines ranging from March 2014 to December 2014.

I chose this specific timeframe and point in the plot of the television show because the actions of the production crew and responses from the general audience during this time are crucial and can be directly and tangibly linked to a significantly large portion of *OUAT*'s LGBTQ+ fans’ increasing discontent and anger towards the writers’ and producers’ cohesive rejection of a fan-created petition on Twitter for the show to be more LGBTQ+ inclusive (via exploring a queer romance between Emma and Regina). The introduction of Hook as Emma’s new love interest and Robin Hood as Regina’s sparked outrage among LGBTQ+ fans of Swan Queen, in particular. The outrage and anger of these fans can largely be found in Tumblr posts and, as such, these serve as one of the foci for analysis. Wittyoncer, in particular, engages in multiple conversations and discussions with other fans during this time frame in regards to the “True Love” trope supported by the show’s script and canon that many LGBTQ+ fans found to be heteronormative and non-inclusive.

### **Methodology, Framework, and IRB**

Once the data were gathered, I performed a qualitative content analysis of the discourse provided through the discussions between wittyoncer and other Swan Queen fans on Tumblr (Mayring, 2000; Mitra, 2010). Using Mayring's deductive category application (2000), I examined the data in search of categories and subcategories that I have developed in accordance with my research questions. I have created explicit definitions for each category throughout the coding process. My initial categories were: 1) Complete rejection of *OUAT* storylines/narratives; 2) Development of counter narratives; 3) Reluctant acceptance of *OUAT* storylines/narratives; and 4) Complete hope for and belief in Swan Queen being "endgame" for the show.

I then coded the data by using these categories. For example, a code for the first category (Complete rejection of *OUAT* storylines/narratives) are instances in which Swan Queen fans express their anger at the show, its writers, and, perhaps, even other fans of the show. Another example of coding for this category may be evident in instances where Swan Queen fans make claims that they will no longer be members of the fandom because of the emotional toll the show and the Tumblr fandom, itself, has taken on them. Moving to the second category (Developing counter narratives), an example code is Swan Queen fan meta and/or fan fiction, of which encapsulates both authorship and readership. A code that highlights the third category (Reluctant acceptance of *OUAT* storylines/narratives) is ambivalence and fans' willingness to endure the show's plotlines and continued reliance on heteronormative romance narratives. Lastly, a code for the final category (Complete hope for and belief in Swan Queen being "endgame" for the show) is found in instances where Swan Queen fans remain positively engaged in the fandom and believe that Emma and Regina are going to fall in love during the show's airing, thus becoming canon rather than just "fanon." Afterwards, I revised my categories based on any

discrepancies within the data and after checking for reliability. I then worked through the text once more, solidifying my categories and themes and, finally, interpreted the results.

I also focused, in part, on Tumblr hashtags, as they are useful tools for research (Zappavigna, 2015; Renninger, 2015). I was primarily interested in hashtags developed by wittyoncer and used in their blog posts. These particular hashtags are used to critique the show's plot/characterization or otherwise call out the marginalization or queer silencing/queer harassment of queer fans of the show and often pertain to these fans' personal narratives and reactions.

This project met the guidelines for IRB exemption, as I have not communicated directly with Swan Queen bloggers at any point during data collection or analysis. Nor have I interviewed, surveyed, or polled any other members of the online fandom community. Furthermore, I do not intend to discuss or otherwise reveal wittyoncer's or any of the other bloggers' personal information (i.e. out them) in this or any future project I may choose to undertake.

**Assumptions/My own biases and reflexivity:**

I operate with the assumption that fandoms such as the Swan Queen fandom are a large, diverse group of individuals who co-create, co-construct, and co-author original pieces of artistry, meta-analyses, and critiques of *OUAT* itself but also fandom as a whole. As such, it is crucial to state my positionality within this project. I consider myself to be a member of queer fandom and have watched the first four seasons of *OUAT*. In the past, I have participated in the Swan Queen fandom on Tumblr, having posted, reblogged, and communicated with others within the fandom off and on for the last four years. In that time, I have observed unique shifts in the Swan Queen fandom on Tumblr that have greatly inspired me to research queer fandom more broadly.

#### IV. FINDINGS

I have spent the majority of my time over the past two years considering a specific queer fandom, the Swan Queen fandom, in order to address and answer my research questions in this thesis: 1) How are members of the Swan Queen fan community developing counter narratives of love by engaging in meaning-making processes and interpretations of *OUAT*? And 2) How do they talk about the purpose and importance of their narratives for themselves or the Swan Queen fan community? Below, I begin by elucidating on the Swan Queen fandom's development and initial purpose before I turn to my first research question.

##### **Research Question 1: Redefining Fairytales?**

The Swan Queen fandom on the social network platform, Tumblr, was constructed initially as an online/virtual space for primarily queer and lesbian fans of *OUAT* to share and discuss their perceptions of the show and talk about their queer and often-times resistant readings and interpretations of the relationship between Emma and Regina, thus creating a queer fandom based on a non-canonical sexual and/or romantic relationship between two female characters on a show structured around fairytales, "True Love," and "Happily Ever After." I will now focus on results found while analyzing the narratives of Swan Queen fans via text posts written and collaboratively discussed on Tumblr in an effort to answer my first research question. I begin by discussing how Swan Queen fans interpreted *Once Upon A Time*'s purpose as a television series and what they believed the creators were setting out to accomplish (i.e. create a modernized fairytale).

According to the text posts on Tumblr, a majority of Swan Queen fans believe that *OUAT*

was created in order to present its audience modern-day re-imaginings of fairytales that challenge what we know about the concepts of “Happily Ever After” and “True Love,” thus actively participating in a progressive project. Below, wityoncer has reblogged<sup>3</sup> a quote from an article from *FemPop Magazine* that indicates that many fans of the show understood that its mission, from the beginning, was to expand upon well-known notions of traditional fairytales and develop a new framework of “Happily Ever After” that could thrive in our modern lives while also complicating hegemonic ideas of “True Love” narratives in media.

*“To take the relationship from a simmering subtext to blatant main text is completely in line with the show’s mission to redefine fairytales and dole out happy endings like candy. Two ladies uniting in love for their son (and possibly each other yes please) is just a logical as hell next step. And if that ISN’T the next step than (sic) someone somewhere in the production process screwed up because there are scenes on Buffy where two lesbians do magic as an honest to God metaphor for sex that were less blatant than that moment.” (Emphasis mine).*

The quote above supports the general understanding of the show that the creators of the series hoped to convey to audience members.<sup>4</sup> The author of the article discusses the show’s mission being that of “redefining fairytales” (*FemPop Magazine*). As such, the quote further explicates that it would be reasonable for the show to introduce a canon romantic relationship between Emma and Regina as a step towards rejecting traditional narratives and redefining fairytales. Additionally, the author of the article compares the scenes between Emma and Regina in which they perform magic together to similar scenes between Tara and Willow from Joss Whedon’s series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This is a particularly insightful comparison as Tara

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes discussed are found on wityoncer blog and are either original posts or ones that have been reblogged by wityoncer from other Swan Queen fans on Tumblr.

<sup>4</sup> Co-creator of the series, Adam Horowitz, has discussed during interviews that the idea for the show was to take the characters from fairytales that we know and “try to find things about them that we haven’t explored before.” Furthermore, Horowitz emphasizes that they are “not generally retelling the exact same story as the fairy tale world.” Quotes taken from an October 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 interview with Karl Keily for NYCC (New York Comic Con).

and Willow are canonically queer characters that fell in love over several seasons and used their powers to save the world. The comment about magic as an allusion to sex refers to the popular trope detailing magic as an inherent trait rather than something external one experiences, thus the ease in which writers such as Whedon are able to liken sexual orientation or sexual exploration with a member of the same sex to learning to control and use one's magic.

Wittyoncer reblogs this quote and adds a small note reading, "THIS. also, LOL-ing." This additional comment signals that wittyoncer appreciates and agrees with the author's perspective and is amused by the comparison between the two shows and their characters' relationships. Additionally, it may also be argued that this fan is amused by the article and the author's take on the entire situation as it unfolded—the author seems exasperated by the lack of similar queering in *OUAT* as the show's narrative progressed from one season to the next. I believe that wittyoncer's amusement lies in a place of mutual exasperation and that they can, in part, find humor in both the article's tone (i.e. sarcasm and biting wit that calls out the person(s) in production who "screwed up") as well as in the distinct lack of any "progress" made by a show interested in redefining fairytales.

As such, it became clear to me while analyzing the data that many within the Swan Queen fandom voiced their opinion that *Once Upon a Time* has not succeeded in creating the progressive re-imagining of fairytales it set out to do. Below, a text post illustrates a Swan Queen fan's anger towards the show's continued reliance on traditional fairytale romance tropes (i.e. "True Love").

"Now, I'm not saying that I expect Swan Queen to become canon. I sadly don't and I wish I did, I wish I had everyone's hopes and dreams, but I can't. *Not when OUAT is telling me and showing me, again and again, how all these white male-female couples are True Loves and belong together.* My brain adheres to logic and, even if OUAT

distinctly lacks such a quality, it sure has been consistent in the shared traits of all its True Love pairings.” (Emphasis mine)

In the quote above, the fan addresses the common and shared hope that many Swan Queen fans have in regards to the relationship becoming canon on the show. However, this fan remains cynical about Swan Queen ever becoming fully realized on the show because, to them, the show’s primary focus and celebration of heterosexist and heteronormative relationships far exceeds any possibility for queering the characters, thus reproducing the notion that only heterosexual white couples are privileged in that they can find “True Love” together. Here, we see that some fans are unhappy or frustrated with the lack of character diversity and the lack of new, queer narratives of “True Love” in the show. However, while this fan goes as far as saying that they do not expect Swan Queen to happen, they do not call out or demand for the show’s creators to rectify their canon narrative to include a queer “Happily Ever After.” As such, this text remains situated in a space meant to identify one of the problems Swan Queen fans face rather than towards fan activism<sup>5</sup> (Jenkins, 2013).

Similarly, a second text post by a different Swan Queen fan emphasizes obstacles they feel the entire queer fandom face when trying to actively participate in their fan practices. This fan discusses the ways in which they feel discouraged to voice their opinion by those outside of the queer fandom. Furthermore, the fan addresses an explicit sense of heterosexism encountered by queer fandom members wherein they are told, by multiple parties, that their ship is not a viable option for the show to pursue:

“When a fan says ‘I really, really want Swan Queen to become canon because they’re two strong, dynamic, beautiful women who have an important role on their show and I think it’s about time that the morals of fairytales expanded to include same-sex couples in their definition of

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<sup>5</sup> I will return to the concept of fan activism later in my analysis.



True Love, too', they don't want to hear that it's not going to happen because it would be too weird. Because that is the very thing that they are hoping to discourage."  
(Emphasis mine)

This quote very neatly summarizes one of the stronger notions held by queer fans that supports canonizing the Swan Queen relationship. Beyond asking the show's creative team to consider the possibility of Swan Queen as a romantic relationship, this individual speaks for others within the queer fandom in an effort to quell the types of obstructive responses by other fans of the show opposing the notion of a queer "True Love" between Emma and Regina, who will be addressed as "anti-Swan Queen fans." In fact, they go so far as to state that the definition of "True Love," as touted by fairytale narratives and reproduced in the show, should become more expansive towards same-sex romantic relationships. For me, there is a distinct focus here on both the definition for "True Love" and the parameters of the "morals of fairytales." "True Love" (in the sense that this particular fan understands it) represents more of a symbolic ideal, developed over time by Western sociocultural practices, that has transformed into a trope in storytelling narratives that celebrate romantic love above all else. Moreover, the "morals of fairytales" prove quite fascinating because the phrasing indicates that the fan already interprets that there are, indeed, morals in play where fairytale narratives and the discourse surrounding fairytale endings are concerned and that these morals work to keep queer romances and notions of "True Love" out of fairytales entirely. Next, I address and answer my first research question by turning to the ways in which Swan Queen fans push back against this moralistic gatekeeping and develop counter narratives of "True Love" by engaging in meaning-making processes and interpretations of the show.

### ***(1) Developing Counter Narratives of "True Love"***

Swan Queen fans develop counter narratives of "True Love" in the show via their

engagement within fandom. The majority of the fans in the Swan Queen fandom disagree with the storylines that developed in season 3 and created their own counter narratives (1) based upon their queer readings and interpretations of Regina and Emma's characters, their interactions with one another, etc. Additionally, these queer fans (2) bond based on their similar interpretations of the show and discuss their reasons for shipping Swan Queen together. Most importantly, the Swan Queen fandom developed out of opposition to the show runners' continued focus on heterosexist representations of "True Love" and "Happily Ever After." As such, (3) Swan Queen fans reject the show's narratives of these two notions through rejection of the canonical "Captain Swan" (CS) and "Outlaw Queen" (OQ) relationships and push for more inclusive storylines and relationships such as the one they support between Emma and Regina.

I found that Swan Queen fans develop their fandom based upon similar queer readings and interpretations of Regina and Emma's characters, their interactions with one another, and through direct dialogue/context from the show. Online, it is very easy to share one's own thoughts and opinions to an extensive group of individuals located around the globe (Renninger, 2012; Jenkins, 2013). Through Tumblr, Swan Queen fans are able to perform these actions and discuss their own thoughts and perceptions of the show. These individual perceptions, once shared with others throughout the Swan Queen fandom, allow fans to encounter others who prescribe to similar or even the same perceptions. This is how a fandom base begins to develop and situate itself in its own context (Jenkins, 1992 & 2012; Bennett, 2010; Grey, 2007). Below, a text post by a Swan Queen fan, followed by subsequent responses from others, illustrates how one fan's perceptions and queer reading of a scene between Regina and Emma on the show is shared with others in the online fandom:

“ok if this is ‘unintentional’ someone needs to tell Lana, the director, and the fucking editor, because if Swan Queen is

not a thing fine, but that last shot makes NO sense if there isn't some underlying feelings that are NOT platonic, because Lana could have had Regina look AWAY and nod and look sad and thoughtful, but NO, she looks at EMMA, aND THEY DO THE FUCKING ZOOM OF ETERNAL LOVE, fuck this show”

The original poster of this quote expresses their exasperation towards the show's creative team in the wake of the show runners' "official" explanation of the emotionally charged scenes between Emma and Regina during the show's first and second seasons wherein they state that any perceived romantic or sexual undertones between the two characters were "unintentional". This is incredibly important because the fan is disagreeing with the show runners' argument and the way that they responded to queer fans' readings, questioning why the scene discussed in the post made it past the cutting room floor if the relationship's elements, readily perceived as queer by Swan Queen fans, were not produced intentionally. The poster even emphasizes the show's use of a common trope, "The Rom-Com Zoom," in a scene between Emma and Regina, as potential evidence of the very act of intentionality the show runners deny having taken part in. The fan ends their post with "fuck this show," illustrating that they are frustrated and angry at how the show runners present a queer potentiality via the "Rom-Com Zoom" trope yet reinsures to hetero audiences that such moments are "unintentional"<sup>6</sup>. The language, rhetoric, and use of random capitalization within the fan's text post illustrates a high level of emotionality on the subject, conveying that this fan acknowledges that Swan Queen may never happen in the show but that they also defend their right as a fan to read scenes between Emma and Regina using their queer perspective.

Another fan reblogs and adds their own commentary to the original poster's text, "No one holds eye contact for that long with their friends. Or enemies. Or whatever. This is love man." I

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<sup>6</sup> I will discuss more on the topic of queer baiting in the latter half of my Findings section.

interpret this additional commentary as agreement with the original poster's queer interpretation of the scenes between Regina and Emma. Moreover, this fan qualifies the looks that have been read in a queer perspective as love. Subsequent to this fan's remarks, wittyoncer adds, "this commentary is epic and spot-on." It is clear, then, that these three fans have similar readings of scenes between the two characters and challenge the show runners' narrative.

This text post thread represents a common sort of grappling queer fans of media take on themselves: wading through and attempting to discern subtext from "main" text. Queer readings stem from a margin, as there was little to no "main" text addressing queer characterization from which to glean from the films and television shows produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This margin carries over to queer fandom practices today because, while there are many more examples of queer representation in media<sup>7</sup>, many of these representations are problematic and tend to mirror the tokenized queer individual seen in media during the 1990's and early 2000's. Thus, in the margins, queer fans develop their ideas, passions, and ultimately, their fandom around subtext. I now turn to an analysis on the reasons why Swan Queen fans ship Emma and Regina together.

## ***(2) Shipping Swan Queen***

As discussed above, these queer fans bond with one another based on their similar interests in and interpretations of the show. I believe that this enables them to discuss their reasons for shipping Swan Queen on Tumblr, which the majority of them perceive as being an open and welcoming space to engage in their fandom practices. In this space Swan Queen fans have developed and nurtured complex and various desires that drive them to ship Emma and Regina together romantically. In this text post, wittyoncer discusses some of them and establishes that there may be too many to account for:

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics from GLAAD report that 2016 saw the highest number of LGBTQ+ characters represented on television. Source: <https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv16>

“OQ and CS as populations are substantially young heterosexual women who eroticize the male halves of the couples and/or identify with the female halves and want that story for themselves. this is why conversations about any problematic issues in those ships go nowhere. now, that’s not to say SQers don’t eroticize Emma or Regina, cuz many of us do, but not as universally or consistently. there’re people who are in it for queer representation, people who are in it because they think it’s an epic story, people who have nuanced understandings that there are issues but think they can be overcome ... almost as many positions as people.”  
(Emphasis mine)

Here, wittyoncer discusses how they perceive the OQ and CS fandoms to be made up of young women who identify as heterosexual thus creating a contrast between these heterocentric ships and Swan Queen as a queer ship. There is an emphasis towards the act of compulsory heterosexuality (i.e. eroticizing the male half and idolizing/identifying with the female halves of the ships) that prevents these fans from having a productive exchange with Swan Queen fans about problematic issues perceived as being dangerous to perpetuate in the “modern-day” fairytales that the show creates.

Importantly, wittyoncer makes clear that some Swan Queen fans *do* eroticize Emma or Regina but that it happens less consistently than in the above-mentioned fandoms and that the Swan Queen fandom should be seen as being comprised of “almost as many positions as people” within the community. I interpret this as meaning that individuals found themselves drawn to this online queer fandom for numerous reasons. As such, this post supports my argument that Swan Queen fans have found in Tumblr a space, or as Berlant and Warner (1998) discuss, a queer counterpublic, where they feel free to express their “desires” and reasons for participating in their queer fandom. Next, I discuss some of these reasons why Swan Queen fans ship the two characters together, as demonstrated by text posts from fans explaining it in their own words.

## Reasons For Shipping Swan Queen

It became clear to me during analysis that Swan Queen fans believe that a romantic relationship between Emma and Regina should be made canonical in the show based upon two very specific arguments: a) It makes sense, narrative-wise, and b) Because they share a son and have already begun to develop as a family. I will discuss each in more detail below.

### A. “It’s just a compelling connection.”

According to the text posts I analyzed, many Swan Queen fans believe that a romantic relationship between Emma and Regina could/should be canonical based on their perceptions of the show’s over-arching narrative, stating that it makes sense to have the two women fall in love after everything they have experienced together. The text post that follows elucidates how one fan, in particular, sees the Swan Queen ship set apart from the canonical, heterosexual ships:

“Possibly the thing I love most about the swanqueen shippers is that nobody told us to ship this. All the other ships on this show are here because somebody told people to ship it. Outlaw queen with the pixie dust, captain swan with the “hook is in love with her” and swanfire because he is henrys father. Nobody told SQ to ship it (seriously everybody has been telling us not to). We can just see the development between two characters and understand that it makes sense for them to be together. its kinda awesome”

The post speaks to the fan’s appreciation of the ship and its fandom and discusses the ways in which Swan Queen evolved organically, built on the audience seeing the development between the two characters and understanding “that it makes sense for them to be together.” Importantly, this fan also makes clear that “nobody” told them to ship Swan Queen and how “everybody has been telling us not to” ship them. I interpret this to mean that Swan Queen fans feel that they have been castigated for their participation within the larger and more general fandom for the show. Additionally, this posts demonstrates the queer fan’s belief that the

canonical ships were specifically created and heavily promoted by the show runners and ABC's PR team, framing them as being the "right" types of romances to ship. By doing so in this manner, the show's "True Love" narrative undermines queer fans' subjectivity when navigating their own complex relationships to both the show and its larger, hegemonic fandom.

Wittyoncer comments on the post, saying that the other ships have to rely on the show runners "hitting [viewers] over the head with them" or being "spoonfed exposition" so that they *do* make sense. Here, wittyoncer implies that they think the plots for the canon romances are mere contrivances that require more unnecessary work for the writers than any potential romance between Emma and Regina would. Additionally, wittyoncer states that Swan Queen is "compelling," echoing the shared belief that Outlaw Queen and Captain Swan are anything but—that there is nothing interesting or new about these romances that has not already been seen in storytelling. Swan Queen, however, offers these prospects for wittyoncer and other fans in the queer fandom and present new iterations of fairytale romance based off of the traditional narratives used in the show on a regular basis. I now shift my focus to Swan Queen fans' perceptions of the "Swan-Mills family" and the fan-generated argument that Swan Queen makes sense based on this family structure.

#### B. "Henry Has Two Moms"

In a longer, more detailed text entry entitled "Henry Has Two Moms and other stuff I'm thinking about," the original poster explains that they think the overarching reason for Swan Queen to be "endgame" is that both women are Henry's mothers and that the show would be doing a great disservice to same-sex couples and female-headed households if the show runners willfully ignore or reject the potential of a "Happily Ever After" featuring Emma, Regina, and their son.

“Swan Queen is more than a ship, it’s a movement. We’ve been saying this since the idea of Emma ‘Swan’ and the Evil ‘Queen’ came onto our television screens... and also not long after we all sort of sat down and said... well, Henry does have two moms... they look at each other like they want to rip each other’s silk shirts to shreds and at the end of the day, HENRY HAS TWO MOMS and that ain’t no joke. And if Swan Queen isn’t endgame? They’ll have made a joke of same-sex headed families. It isn’t a joke, not when studies show how healthy female headed households are. Not when same-sex couples are fighting so hard for their rights, not when women are still paid less than men... HENRY HAS TWO MOMS cannot end in any way other than for Emma and Regina to be together, as co-parents and yes, that includes a deep, loving relationship with one another because at the end of the day, THAT IS THE STORY THAT #OUAT IS TELLING US and has been since the pilot episode.” (Emphasis mine).

For the original poster, any outcome of the show that does not result in an “endgame” for Swan Queen will “have made a joke out of same-sex headed families.” Moreover, this fan lists numerous real-world issues that queer and LGBT+ individuals experience on a daily basis while arguing that *OUAT* has to make Swan Queen endgame and explaining that there can be no other alternative, “...not when same-sex couples are fighting so hard for their rights, not when women are still paid less than men...” This is, potentially, a heavy indictment of the show runners and their broad disregard for these systemic issues in favor of re-creating and re-telling heterosexist narratives of family, “True Love,” and “Happily Ever After.” In fact, when reblogging the post, wittyoncer hashtags, “#this is some fucking amazing meta<sup>8</sup>” as appreciation for the time and effort that this fan took to dissect their thoughts and critique the show runners’ overall missteps in dealing with the potential for queer romance between Emma and Regina.

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<sup>8</sup> Drawing from Jenkins’ concept (1992; 2013), meta can best be described as meta-textual analysis performed by fans in which they draw on their own knowledge and beliefs in an effort to expand on situations presented in the show (plot, character representation, etc.).



Additionally, the original poster boldly and proudly proclaims that Swan Queen is a “movement.” By saying that the act of shipping Swan Queen is a movement, this fan reestablishes the social implications of queer families, representation, and media advocacy that intertwine quite commonly in their lived experiences while also relaying that Swan Queen is a collective identity (Hunt and Benford, 2004). Jenkins (1992; 2013) rightly states that fans incorporate their own lived experiences into their fandom participation and I believe that there is an open exchange and interplay between the two that facilitates the expansion from fandom activity solely towards fan activity *and* fan activism. Recognizing their queer fandom engagement as a social movement provides this fan an outlet to discuss queerphobia and the targeted aggressions one experiences in a heterocentric society and the ways in which these aggressions are transferred into fandom itself. Perhaps there is no distinction between their fandom activity and their fan activism. This particular rumination will be addressed further as I delve in to an analysis of gaslighting and antagonism in an effort to shore up the specific interventions of queer fandoms such as the Swan Queen community in an answer to my second research question.

Overall, the original poster’s main message remains one of hope for seeing Swan Queen become canon in the show some day because they believe that Emma, Regina, and Henry living “Happily Ever After” is the story the show has been telling since the very beginning. However, I believe that this perspective does run the risk of producing a homonormative framework, as many Swan Queen fans that support the idea of Emma and Regina’s relationship becoming canon do so based on heterosexist and heteronormative notions of what constitutes a family. I strongly believe that this factor should be studied in greater detail at a later date.

### ***(3) The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the “True Love” Narrative***

Above, I have discussed how the Swan Queen fandom formed and continues to develop out of its members’ opposition to the show runners’ focus on hegemonic (e.g. heterocentric) representations of “True Love” and “Happily Ever After.” Thus, Swan Queen fans engage in their fandom by developing and sharing their own counter narratives of “True Love.” I maintain that the Swan Queen fans on Tumblr engage in their fandom by actively addressing and attempting intervention through critiques of the show (and its creators, actors, plotlines, etc.), by questioning and discussing plot and character development via meta textual analysis, and by creating their own fan art and fan fiction to share with others in the queer fandom. I will now address each action more closely.

Clearly, fans often vent their frustrations and disappointment at the show (as seen in many of the text posts). However, this sometimes does not help to quell their questions or move beyond feeling as if their favorite show has, in some way, betrayed them. Jenkins (1992) addresses this very concept in a chapter from *Textual Poachers* entitled “It’s Not a Fairytale Anymore.” In this case, fans of the American fantasy/drama *Beauty and the Beast* (1987-1990) found themselves at odds with the producers’ narratives for the show and took matters in to their own hands, so to speak, by creating their own interpretations of the stories and character development that diverge from those of the show. As such, the Swan Queen fan community is just one of many fandoms that actively engages in the fan-creation of texts, images, and videos. Fan art and fan videos are extremely important elements to the Swan Queen fandom but for the sake of this project I narrow my focus to the production of fan fiction by members of the queer fandom who seek to reject the show’s narratives and write their own. The text post that follows demonstrates how wittyoncer addresses their community—expressing a shared sense of collective anger in response to an episode that had recently aired,

“man i haven’t even seen this thing yet and i am grossed out/mad by proxy just from perusing tumblr.

SO: i’m gonna do what i can to have chapter 10 first thing tuesday morning because i know i’m gonna need to spend time with SwanQueen to cleanse my brain, as we all must, so i’ll offer that up as my contribution.

think of it as a hug for the feels...”

Wittyoncer seems to address the entire fandom and the feelings that many in the community were expressing on Tumblr at the time. Here, they are commiserating with their fellow fans about the episode as a whole rather than a particular scene, which leads me to believe that the episode featured heavy amounts of Outlaw Queen and/or Captain Swan scenes. As such, wittyoncer offers an updated chapter of one of their fan fiction series to their followers on Tumblr as a “contribution” to the queer fandom in an effort to help them “cleanse” their brains of the upsetting elements from the show. Moreover, wittyoncer offers the fan fiction chapter as “a hug for the feels,” indicating that their text may be able to help their fellow Swan Queen fans feel better, emotionally.

Thus far, I have shown how the Swan Queen fandom developed on Tumblr and the ways in which queer fans have rejected *Once Upon a Time*’s heterocentric narratives in favor of writing their own. I now shift my attention towards a discussion of how Swan Queen fans talk about the purpose and importance of their counter narratives, both for themselves and for the Swan Queen community as a whole, as I answer my second research question.

### **Research Question 2: A Queer Fandom’s Importance and Their Goals for Intervention**

Based on my analysis, Swan Queen fans maintain that the importance and purpose of their counter narratives is to engage with the fandom community because they (1) feel that the show is queerbaiting them and are attempting to counteract negative effects of queerbaiting, (2) use their narratives to critique the show’s heterosexist storylines as empty and dangerous, and (3)

respond to gaslighting by the show runners and (4) other fans. I will focus on each of these points in more detail below.

### ***(1) Queerbaiting and its Implications for Queer Fans***

Thus far in this section, I have endeavored to elucidate further the notion that Swan Queen fans bond over their shared experiences when watching the show and their similar queer readings of Emma and Regina and that they eventually came to the conclusion that *OUAT* does not provide an inclusive or “new” fairytale at all. Rather, I argue, these fans believe that the show is queerbaiting them in an effort to draw larger audiences. In what follows, Swan Queen fans discuss why they feel this way and argue further against the queerbaiting they see taking place by countering with their own specific arguments supporting a romantic relationship between Emma and Regina.

Below, a Swan Queen fan posts a short text post constituting entirely of hashtags that reads, “#subtext #what subtext #it’s text ffs.”

The fan created a text post containing hashtags rather than regular text, conveying a unique semiotic message about subtext within the show—ostensibly in regards to Regina and Emma’s interactions, even though there is no mention of either character. In contrast to other fans in the Swan Queen community that focus on subtext, the poster argues that the characters’ interactions are “main” text (i.e. intentional). The content, as well as the tone, of the post illustrates this fan’s impatience at having to explain why they do not perceive Emma and Regina’s interactions as being subtext because of the use of “ffs” at the end, commonly translated as “for fuck’s sake<sup>9</sup>.” I believe that the fan uses this post as a response to the larger issue at hand between several disparate groups of fans of the show on Tumblr: whether or not

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<sup>9</sup> This common abbreviation is used in texting and online messaging and conveys a sense of aggravation or annoyance.

Swan Queen fans have the right to publicly call out the show runners and the queerbaiting taking place. In other words, many Swan Queen fans feel compelled to defend their decisions to call out queerbaiting in the show and to do this, they must simultaneously 1) provide evidence to naysayers that there is, indeed, subtextual elements of attraction (or "maintext," in this fan's case) between the two women and 2) that the show runners are portraying it purposefully with no intentions of developing the relationship further. Wittyoncer adds their own commentary about the production team of the show and the intentionality of their actions:

"you cannot fucking tell me they didn't know what they were doing when they wrote and acted and directed and edited these lines. no one on the planet in 2011, let alone working in genre TV, was that unaware of the existence of same-sex desire, slashing, etc. what was "unintentional" was that fans latched onto it and wanted the level of things that they had already put in the text to continue and develop along the trajectory that they laid out, where they just wanted to hint and run and captivate our attention and for us to sit down and shut up and take what they gave us. because make no mistake, when they say "fan," they mean someone who sits down and shuts up and takes whatever they give them."

Wittyoncer reveals here that they are displeased with the show runners for framing the instances between Emma and Regina that queer fans find to be evidence of queering the characters as "unintentional" (as discussed in more depth in the first half of this section). Furthermore, by highlighting that it was 2011 and that "no one on the planet" could claim to be unaware of slashing and same-sex desire, wittyoncer confronts what they see to be the problem: show runners knew what they were doing when producing particular scenes between Emma and Regina that could be read queerly but expected fans to "sit down and take whatever" they decided to produce. Wittyoncer's use of swearing in the beginning instills within their argument a sense of anger towards anyone refusing to believe that a mainstream television show could (or would) employ tactics of queerbaiting (discussed more in-depth in Previous Literature section).

**(2) “Dangerous” heterosexist storylines**

Below, wittyoncer discusses what they perceive to be their right to call out and critique the show runners for their continuous portrayal of Captain Hook as a dastardly pirate who will not stop until he gets his way. In this case, getting his way means aggressively pursuing Emma even after she has made it clear she was not interested in returning his affection. Wittyoncer speaks of the social implications of such dangerous portrayals,

“we who are concerned about the social implications of “rewarding” Hook for not listening the myriad times Emma indicated disinterest aren’t inherently hateful. we’re making a critique. we’re pointing out a social system. and we have a right to call Adam and Eddy out when they imply that not taking “no” for an answer is anything other than fundamentally unacceptable.”

Wittyoncer begins their post by disagreeing with the accusation harnessed against Swan Queen fans that they are “inherently hateful” for their critiques against the show runners. Rather, wittyoncer clarifies that Swan Queen fans have collectively agreed that the storylines being told in the show about Hook’s aggressive pursuit of Emma Swan are dangerous. The danger lies in the perpetuation of rape culture and the systemic violence that women face every day from men who do not believe that “no means no.” In critiquing the way that the show runners have portrayed Hook solely as a persistent suitor, wittyoncer wants to make clear that “rewarding” him by having Emma suddenly change her mind in the show has real and damaging social implications in the world. By this, they mean that the show remains complicit in promoting rape culture and its harmful affects on women and girls who have grown up believing that they have no say in the matter of romance and sexual agency.

Fans not only actively address and critique the show and its production team, they also question and discuss plot and character development. The following text post by wittyoncer

illustrates the way in which they feel the plotline regarding Regina and Robin Hood's seemingly rushed courtship is not sensible and how this goes against who Regina is as a character,

“What I am fundamentally not okay with, and not just as, again, a confessed SQ advocate, is losing who Regina is to make this happen. She has, due to life experience, become perennially suspicious, and she's emotionally destroyed right now. She absolutely cannot immediately form some sort of deep bond with a stranger, fate or no fate. Can't. I'd cope with them moving toward it if it was organic and I could believe that Regina would be happy, because I'm Regina first even over SQ (though I think SQ is her best shot). But right now I don't see how we get to Regina/happy on this route.”

It becomes clear when reading the post that wittyoncer disagrees very strongly with the Regina/Robin storyline in regards to Regina's character development. Additionally, they clarify that being a “confessed SQ advocate” has very little to do with their discontent with the show. Rather, wittyoncer is concerned with this plotline because they feel that it leads to “losing who Regina is” in order for the show runners to accomplish their goal of making Outlaw Queen canon. This concept of “losing” what makes a character who they are is commonly called “character assassination” by fandom members<sup>10</sup> as fans have strong and, oftentimes, rigid or fixed ideas of what their favorite characters should be like in terms of mannerisms, behavior, backstory/continuity, and emotionality. Indeed, these factors often are imbricated alongside a fan's own “headcanon,” or, how they perceive the character to think, feel, and react to their fictional environment based on the fan's own ontological perspective (i.e. their own lived experiences).

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<sup>10</sup> Jenkins (1992) refers to the concept of “character assassination” as “character rape” in *Textual Poachers*. While he accurately used the term most accepted by fan communities during the 1980s and early 90s, this is not the case today. Clearly the use of the term “rape,” even when used abstractly by fandom members to address symbolic damages to their favorite shows' characters, is problematic and triggering for many. The shift to the term “character assassination” lessens the stigma and makes it more acceptable and approachable.

Wittyoncer goes on to explain why Regina would never embark in a relationship with a stranger during a period in time where she is “emotionally destroyed.” This assertion illustrates how they actively question the believability of Regina’s actions in the show, positing that Regina has experienced too much in her life to fall in love with Robin—regardless of the show runners’ developing narrative focusing on Robin Hood and Regina being soul mates who are bound by Tinker Bell’s “pixie dust” and fate to meet and fall in love. Many in the Swan Queen fandom, including wittyoncer, see this as a ploy or contrivance by the show’s producers to move the plot forward and garner fuller audience support for “Outlaw Queen.”

*Further Navigating Contentious Relationships: “The Powers That Be” and “Anti-SQ”*

Based on my analysis so far, it is most evident that Swan Queen fans feel that *Once Upon a Time*’s creative team rejects Swan Queen (or even the potential for it in the show) in favor of writing heterosexist storylines and relationships for Emma and Regina. Below, a text post thread demonstrates a fairly typical “group” discussion between Swan Queen fans about the show’s “soulmate” story arc in seasons 3 and 4. The original text in this post is structured in the form of an “Anonymous Ask” submitted to a fan that answers it publically on their blog. This thread has been reblogged by wittyoncer wherein they add their own thoughts. The anonymous fan asks,

“Hood is not as a big threat to Swan Queen as Hook. The whole soulmate thing came pretty much out of the blue because A&E thought it’ll make us happy to see Regina fall in love with a random dude. Hook on other hand is their favorite manchild and one of the main reasons they wanted the rights of Peter Pan since the first episode. Of all characters they sent him to New York to find Emma. 'Find' - the one word that the show main canon couple equalize with happy ending. That's when my last hope sunk”

In response to the message above, the original poster writes,

“Pretty much agree with you on that, anon. But still, Emma looks really NOT interested in Hook so for now I’m okay, but we got



spoiled about what happen between Hood and Regina and THAT hurts like hell...”

wittyoncer reblogs the entire thread above and adds,

“seconded. in terms of attachment Robin is the threat because Regina’s interested in a way Emma is canonically a million percent not (+ outcome spoilers), but there’s a strong chance of tragedy. but then yes, the “favorite manchild” factor and the “find” factor and the “we need a sexy guy on the show because ladies think with their vaginas in deciding what to watch and are all straight” factor and the official pro CS position are all troubling. heteronormativity with a side of dubcon, i guess.”

Here, the anonymous Swan Queen fan asking the “question” makes clear that they believe that the show runners (aka “The Powers That Be” or TPTB) are under the impression that the show’s audience is 1) monolithic and uniform, and 2) that this “passive audience” (Jenkins, 2012) wants to see Regina and Emma with “dudes,” only, thus perpetuating traditional fairytales and the use of heterocentric romance tropes. In response to this “Ask” on their blog, the original poster agrees with the anonymous fan, reiterating that they also see TPTB’s actions as favoring the straight ship over the queer potentiality of the Swan Queen ship.

Wittyoncer adds their own thoughts about TPTB to the thread, saying that Horowitz and Kitsis are operating on the assumption that half of the entire audience for the show is completely in favor of seeing Emma and Regina fall in love with male characters “because ladies think with their vaginas” and “are all straight.” Summarizing the key points made in the original post between the anon fan with their “ask” and the Swan Queen fan who answered it, wittyoncer drolly offers their perception of TPTB’s actions by calling it out for being “heteronormativity with a side of dubcon.” This is a strong critique masked as sarcasm, as wittyoncer is accusing the show runners of promoting and perpetuating heterocentric relationships (in of itself not an entirely problematic issue) while also introducing the troubling concept of dubcon. “Dubcon” is fan jargon for “dubious consent,” implying that there has not been an explicit discussion or

acceptance from an individual before they engage in sexual activity with another. Thus, wittyoncer's response identifies and names a dangerous element that they feel is being threaded in to the Captain Swan story arc that further emphasizes a reliance on rape culture. Moreover, I suggest that the call outs and criticism of the show and TPTB such as those shown above lead the show runners to gaslight the queer fans which then encourages antagonistic, heterosexist fans of *Once Upon a Time* who oppose Swan Queen ("anti-SQ fans") to threaten and attack Swan Queen fans online by telling them that they made it all up or they are sick/crazy/wrong to ship Swan Queen as a couple.

### **(3) Gaslighting**

We move on from analyzing text posts recounting the ways in which Swan Queen fans express their critiques and disappointment with the show to text posts expressing the common-held belief that the show runners are gaslighting them in order to make them doubt themselves, their grievances against the show, as well as the validity of their counter narratives. The following "Ask" addresses Hook potentially gaslighting Emma in the show but, more importantly, the fan who answers the question in their blog states that the actions in the show (above) are linked to *TPBT's* efforts to gaslight queer fans in an attempt to make Captain Hook look innocent after portraying him as a misogynistic villain throughout much of the early seasons. The question posed reads,

"One of the many, many things that have been bothering about Hook is his lies to Emma; ones she should immediately know are untrue – seeing her power when Cora tried to take her heart (he was unconscious), about how she defeated Pan (Gold), and Zelena (Regina). Would you say that Hook is 'gaslighting' Emma in a 'minor' way?"

The Swan Queen fan who received this question responds with,

"well, psychology is not my strong suit, but i'll do my best.  
definition of gaslighting:

a form of mental abuse in which false information is presented with the intent of making victims doubt their own memory, perception, and sanity. Instances may range simply from the denial by an abuser that previous abusive incidents ever occurred, up to the staging of bizarre events by the abuser with the intention of disorienting the victim.

and honestly, *what i really would say is that this these lies are not a glaring failure in continuity but actually part of TPTB gaslighting us. Hook is retconning Emma because flattery will get you everywhere, but it's also a way to retcon Hook into a good guy.*

it will be easier for them to ram this through if we doubt our own memories of his rape jokes and creepy insistence on his crush on Emma in the face of her disinterest and the transacting of her between Hook and Neal and all that shit they did. so they are suddenly (though wildly inconsistently) making him act like supportive boyfriend, facts be damned, so that he can become actual boyfriend.

*...and this is why the fact that all the nastiness they ever wrote for Hook is documented in full, living, moving color on Tumblr is so vital. we will not forget. we will not forgive.”* (Emphasis mine)

In answering the question posed to them, this fan makes an effort to define the term as they understand it. They then introduce their belief that TPTB are the ones who are guilty of gaslighting the Swan Queen fandom, transferring the action from the realm of fiction and interactions between the characters to the real and lived world of viewers, fans, and producers who share a complicated and contentious relationship. By asserting their belief that it is TPTB who gaslight the fans of the show (particularly the queer fans), this individual implicates that the producers are the villains in this narrative and that their re-branding of Captain Hook as the “good guy” is simply a method used to ensure that the show’s fans accept his worth as Emma’s boyfriend and potential “True Love” without ever having to address the rape jokes and his “creepy” behavior around Emma that were consistent in his portrayal in earlier seasons.

The last portion of the fan’s response demonstrates their unwillingness to be gaslit by the producers as well as their refusal to accept Hook’s sudden change in characterization. They

proclaim that the Swan Queen fandom's efforts in documenting "all the nastiness they ever wrote for Hook" on Tumblr is *vital*, ending with "we will not forget. we will not forgive." Invoking the entire Swan Queen fandom in this statement creates a collective action borne out of anger and distrust at the producers for their actions and mistreatment of the queer fan community. What is more, this last sentence emphatically demonstrates that this fan holds a grievance against the producers and that they continue to participate in the online fandom in an effort to document the ways in which they, themselves (as well as others in their community), are gaslit and made to feel crazy or wrong for both their rejection of the canon romances and their insistence in shipping Swan Queen.

In reblogging this thread of text, wittyoncer implies that it is pertinent to consider the original poster's stance on the subject of gaslighting. Furthermore, they include three hashtags in their reblog (#ouat meta, # anti-captain hook, and #anti-captain swan), instilling a very clear message that they are in support of their fellow fans communicating their grievances with the show and its producers. These hashtags illustrate a personal as well as a collective stance against the show's narratives and can (perhaps should?) be read as further fractioning away from the larger and more general/hegemonic fandom for the show that antagonizes Swan Queen fans on Tumblr through Anonymous Asks submissions that aim to target and attack Swan Queen fans directly. These actions, taken alongside the gaslighting from the producers, further aim to marginalize and Other members of the queer fandom.

#### ***(4) Experiences of Queerphobic Antagonism and Violence***

Following such a powerful fan response to the gaslighting of queer fans by the show runners, it is imperative to continue in a similar vein in order to illustrate the acts of violence taken upon Swan Queen fans by those within the show's general fandom who antagonize and

threaten queer fandom members based on their own queerphobic and anti-LGBT+ beliefs. These attacks come in many forms but most commonly rely on textual threats and hate speech via Anonymous Ask submissions. The interaction below demonstrates a violent attack on Swan Queen fans (as a group) by an individual posting an anonymous “Ask” to a Swan Queen fandom account on Tumblr. The Swan Queen fandom account is public and run by administrators who decide what content to publish on the blog. In other words, it is not an individual fan’s blog but rather a space in which large numbers of Swan Queen fans submit their “confessions” about the show, the characters, their perspectives and thoughts about Swan Queen, and so on.

The message from Anonymous reads:

“For fuck sake how many fucking homo characters do you need? You bullied Adam and Eddy into giving you Mulan now stop trying to ruin the rest of the fucking show. Once will not be ruined by perverts and fucking filth like you. I will not let my children watch that sort of TV. Neither Emma or Regina are gay so stop pushing your agenda onto other people! Just fuck off and leave it be. Hope you just curl up and die fucking freak!”

Upon reading the “Ask,” one detects the anger and revulsion within the Anonymous poster’s words (referring to queer characters, collectively, as “fucking homo characters”). They then complain that Swan Queen fans bullied the creators of the show into making Mulan canonically, though not transparently, queer in the show’s 5th season. This culminates in their command for the queer fandom to “stop trying to ruin the rest of the fucking show.” Implicated throughout the message is their personal and political stance on LGBTQ+ rights. Take for example their next sentence in which they refer to Swan Queen fans (both individually and collectively) as “perverts” and “fucking filth.” Harsh and hateful, these words are aimed to hurt their reader. The Anonymous Tumblr user continues their attack by saying that they will not let their children watch “that kind of TV,” referring specifically to any media content that includes

queer content. Moreover, this individual refers to Swan Queen fans' collective activism (i.e. pushing for Swan Queen to become canon) as an "agenda"—this, of course, refers to the so-called "Gay Agenda" that has been used in anti-LGBTQ+ discourse since the latter end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to drive right wing and religious protests today.

The last two sentences, in particular, warrant scrutiny. "Anonymous" might have ended with their penultimate sentence ("Just fuck off and let it be"), yet they made the decision to add, "Hope you just curl up and die fucking freak!" The former, while aggressive in its own right, still conveys some minute sense of civility in telling the Administrator of the Swan Queen blog to "let it be." In other words, they are telling Swan Queen fans to stop shipping Regina and Emma altogether, demonstrating the poster's wish for the symbolic annihilation of the Swan Queen community in an effort to further silence fans' efforts to address their grievances. However, by adding the last sentence, the Anonymous poster has committed an act of hate speech in a willful attempt to harass and harm the individual in charge of the blog and, by extension, the rest of the queer fandom community. This is a direct attack on queer fans' existences based entirely on the Anonymous poster's personal hatred. Additionally, this hatred has been transferred directly into a particular Tumblr space (the Swan Queen blog) where queer fans had, in the past, felt relatively secure participating in their fandom activities. Thus, this queer public space has been breached.

Regardless of its virtual components, this queer online space and its community members now experience the same violence, aggressions (both micro and macro) and threats that queer and LGBT+ individuals face in their daily lives. Next, I will examine the blog administrator's response to the message. Additionally, I look at another member of the Swan Queen fandom's response to the hateful message wherein they try to bolster the administrator's spirits. These

responses are, in my mind, far more important to consider than the Anonymous message by itself because they matter both for the fans individually and collectively.

The Swan Queen blog's administrator reblogs the message, adding, "I will not even get down on your level but people have messaged me asking to see this message." This response addresses the Anonymous poster's attack on them, as an individual, and how the administrator of the blog refuses to respond in kind to the message. Moreover, they clarify that the purpose for reblogging the Anonymous message is because other Swan Queen fans have requested its publication for the blog's followers to read. By making it visible, the blog's administrator hopes to address the violence in acts and to facilitate an open conversation about being targeted by anti-Swan Queen fans who express their queer and homophobic beliefs through acts of hate speech. I believe that it can be implied that other members in the queer fandom for *Once Upon a Time* have, at some point in time, experienced similar attacks for shipping Swan Queen. This leads me to an insightful response from a Swan Queen fan who reblogged the thread and responds,

*"This is WHY Swan Queen has to happen.*

*Look, two years ago, even the SQ shippers that I knew anyhow, could have gotten on board with a LI introduced for Regina and another for Emma, that wouldn't have amounted to SQ=endgame but would have given some kind of organic, open-ended, potentially interesting storyline. Two years ago we weren't demanding endgame.*

*What changed?*

*This level and amount of bullying was one major change. The more het on the show, the more the bullying against Swan Queen shippers increased. The trolling increased and the attacks increased. We're now dealing with backlash. And this backlash is fed by the heterosexism that both demands and nourishes the contrived 'ships' known as OQ and CS.*

*Another major change: this audience has started demanding more than just subtext. we the audience generally stopped wanting to settle for less. There may be dissidents in that argument, people who still insist that subtext is good enough and the rest of us should shut our damn pie holes (LOL) but there are too many of us now refusing to just accept anything but SQ=canon/endgame...Ok,*

*anyhow, yeah, the writing and the PR and the fandom have created a toxic problem of hatred and homophobia. But...The good news? People are having ongoing, intelligent discussion about heterosexism and its meanings and implications. This kind of bullying, this kind of toxic hateful shit that swan-queenconfessions has had to shoulder above? This crap is becoming blatant to the point that very few (only a troll or two) can deny that it's happening any longer.*

Swan Queen has to now be endgame. The writers have created a context where refusing to pull Emma/Regina closer together will make ABC look bad, it'll make them look bad, and all for no good reason.”

The fan reblogging the thread from the blog's administrator begins their commentary by proclaiming that “This is WHY Swan Queen has to happen.” We can only assume that “this” refers to the Anonymous poster's malicious words and their affective power to harm. Continuing their commentary, the fan establishes that two years prior to that particular point in time (4<sup>th</sup> season) most Swan Queen fans were not as passionately engaged in their fan activism, but they are now “demanding” to see Emma and Regina become endgame on the show. The fan believes that this stance shifted in large part due to two major changes within fandom for the show: 1) The increased promotion of the canon/heterosexist ships in the show that further spurred anti-Swan Queen fans on in their bullying of queer fandom members (“The trolling and the attacks increased.”) and 2) the audience, particularly queer members of the audience, began demanding more than the subtext they saw between the two women in a direct response to feeling queer baited by the producers (“we the audience generally stopped wanting to settle for less”). Further down in the fan's commentary they state, “the writing and the PR and the fandom have created a toxic problem of hatred and homophobia.” This fan understands that these three key elements of the show have led to the increased negativity and homophobic aggressions from non/anti-Swan Queen fans against individuals within the queer fandom. They call this a toxic problem, in fact. By naming the problem toxic, they are saying that it could, perhaps, produce real harm to



members of the Swan Queen fandom. They shift away from identifying the problem to addressing the “good news” that stems from it: fan activism and a growing number of discussions centered around heterosexism and what it means.

They continue, arguing that the “toxic hateful shit” that the fan blog has endured is becoming commonplace enough that it is becoming “blatant” in its visibility. This visibility, the fan argues, means that Swan Queen has to become canon because “the writers have created a context where refusing to pull Emma/Regina closer together will make ABC look bad.” Thus, refusing to make Swan Queen “endgame” becomes an issue of reputation for ABC and the producers. Moreover, the fan believes that ABC and its employees have no choice but to, bluntly speaking, take the queer fandom’s side in the escalating “fandom war” focused on the characters’ sexuality and homophobia. In sum, this fan’s perceptions of the mounting aggressions against queer fandom members on Tumblr as well as their growing certainty in the network’s potential support for the Swan Queen fandom leave them hopeful that there can be progress made in decentering the show’s heterosexist narratives.

Wittyoncer reblogs from the Swan Queen fan above and adds, “this is some goddamn outstanding meta.” Again, reblogging the entire thread implies that they appreciate the discussion that has taken place. Their additional comment about the thread—specifically the Swan Queen fan’s contribution above—being “goddamn outstanding meta” shows how much they value the thoughts and perspectives of other members of the Swan Queen fandom and how useful meta discussions are when situations such as this one, wherein the real world and its negativities breach supposedly safe spaces for fans to actively participate in their fandom.

## V. DISCUSSION

It has been my goal to illustrate what happens when a particular group of queer fans no longer believe that what they think and feel matter to the producers as well as other fans of their favorite television show. Indeed, members of the Swan Queen fandom continue to fight against the foreclosure of their very own “Happily Ever After” even as they come to terms with the notion that they have become disenchanted. Disagreeing with the show and rejecting its running discursive narrative, we see evidence of them choosing to, instead, create and maintain their own counter narratives featuring Emma and Regina online where they can be shared, discussed, and celebrated by others within the queer fandom.

By rejecting the show’s narratives of “True Love” and creating their own counter narratives, resisting its producers’ efforts to gaslight them into doubting themselves and their grievances, and addressing the aggressive and oftentimes verbally violent attacks on individual members of the Swan Queen fandom on Tumblr, this fandom pushes back against the institutionalized nature of media fandom where heterosexism drives plot and character development and rewards, as wittyoncer argues, “fans that just sit back and take it.” Indeed, queer fandoms such as the Swan Queen fandom provide ample evidence that, contrary to what the producers of *OUAT* think, there is no such thing as a passive fandom. They will not forget and they will not forgive.

### *Fandom as an institution*

As the “dust” has settled and my thoughts and considerations have fallen into place, it remains clear to me that fandom is not a monolithic entity in the slightest. Nor is fandom a

completely unifying and well-oiled process as Bacon-Smith asserted in *Enterprising Women* (1992). The same year, Jenkins published the first edition of *Textual Poachers* (1992) in which he set out to illustrate that fandom is an active participatory culture where one chooses to claim an identity as a fan, disagreeing with the ease in which fandom so quickly became the punchline to a joke about not having a life (9-10). In *Textual Poachers*, he achieves his goals of shifting our perceptions of fandom by using the words of fans themselves to explain why they call themselves such. I kept his research efforts and his quasi-autoethnographic method of collecting fans' narratives in mind throughout my analysis of text posts that were carefully and thoughtfully crafted by Swan Queen fans on Tumblr. Overwhelmingly, Swan Queen fans demonstrate in their posts a concept that Jenkins discusses in regards to fandom culture during a conversation with Suzanne Scott, "[F]ans have had to resist pressures that would shut down their readings of texts—pressures towards heteronormativity in their own everyday lives and in the public response to their interpretive and creative practices" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 2012, xxxii). However, the fandom Jenkins describes in the quote above is *not* the cohesive queer fandom that I know and recognize as the Swan Queen fandom.

Basing his interest in exploring fandom culture on his own identity as a fan, he primarily focuses his analysis and discussion of fandom on heterosexual individuals—heterosexual women in particular. As such, I believe that Jenkins' assessment of fandom and fans remains generalized and hetero-centric. Without actually addressing it as such, he briefly mentions but does not offer any theories about queer fandom during the above-mentioned conversation with Scott, saying, "critical theory needs to be attentive to whose fantasies are being excluded, what mechanisms are excluding them, and which groups have the power to include or exclude from the cultural mainstream" (xxxix). I am in agreement with Jenkins on this matter and have endeavored to do

just this by focusing on contentions between queer and non-queer fans of *Once Upon a Time*.

The development and maintenance of such a queer fandom require further attention from academe, which is why I propose a return to queer theoretical work to better address both.

Below, I elucidate on a few ways that queer theory attends to the study of queer fandom communities and further facilitates discussion of the particular intersection between Fandom as an institution (hence my use of the capital “F”) and queerness.

### **Queer Theory and Queer Fandom**

Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1993) may be of use in the effort to shore up linkages between queer self-identity and queer fandom membership. The text’s introduction, “Axiomatic,” lists axioms that emphasize difference among individuals, maintaining that each “can differentiate even people of identical gender, race, nationality, class, and 'sexual orientation' – each one of which, however, if taken seriously as pure *difference*, retains the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality” (1993, 24-25). The first axiom simply reads, “people are different from each other” (22). Far too often, we reduce the contributions of difference, particularly the productivity that follows, in an effort to preserve a status quo. Similarly, we reduce the contributions of queer fans to media fandom in order to maintain hegemonic standards held up by the institution of popular culture.

Using this axiom enables us to further question the differences between hegemonic fandom and counterhegemonic fandom or, more plainly, heterocentric fandom and queer fandom. Jenkins (1992) similarly discusses this notion, pointing out that we often operate under the impression that there is a “right way” and a “wrong way” to be a fan. Queer fandom cannot exist within a vacuum, out of sight and stored away for the comfort of heterocentric fans who consider queer shipping wrong. In the case of the queer fandom dedicated to the Swan Queen

ship, popular culture's continued reliance on outdated tropes of romance and fairytale "True Love" such as *OUAT*'s exclude and marginalize those that seek representations of a queer "Happily Ever After". Indeed, it is clear that queer fandom members must continuously work on their complex relationship with the increasingly more hegemonic Fandom and resist its members' assimilationist habits that lead to perpetuating compulsory heterosexuality.

Bennett's (2010) close analysis of the 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine* and his considerations surrounding fandom, affect, and reading practices offer up much in the way of queer theorization. Indeed, he supposes that there is "something queer about fandom in general" based on his understanding of both Sedgwick's and Jenkins' works on affect and shame (Bennett 2010, 18-19). This is quite an impactful statement to make in regards to an ever-growing cultural practice—indeed, one that I believe has become institutionalized—and is one that requires us to take a moment to reconsider our own relational proximity to the often contradicting emotions we experience when actively participating in fandom. If Bennett is correct and there is something queer about fandom in general, how did we arrive upon the precipice of a widening chasm between heterocentric/"right" ways of being a fan and queer/"wrong" ways? Clearly, the anti-Swan Queen fans of *Once Upon a Time* who anonymously attack Swan Queen fans on Tumblr do not agree with Bennett, insisting instead that a fandom developed and maintained out of support for a non-canonical *queer* ship such as that between Regina and Emma is wrong and/or sick and should be silenced completely. In the Anonymous Ask submitted to the administrator of the Swan Queen "confessions" blog, the anti-Swan Queen fan attempted to demoralize and shame the queer fandom for shipping two women together. Furthermore, "Anonymous" attacked both the administrator and the entire Swan Queen fandom by telling them that they "hope [they] curl up and die." There are, then, scary and oftentimes threatening instances in which queer

fandom members such as those within the Swan Queen fandom encounter the same hatred and queerphobia on Tumblr that they do “offline” in the world around them. Regardless of place and space, queer fans that embrace their fandom and participate outside of the hegemonic standards of the quotidian are forcefully told that their fannish contributions are neither appreciated nor welcome in the larger, more general Fandom. The reactions and responses from Swan Queen fans to queerbaiting, gaslighting, and threats from queerphobic OUAT fans are excellent illustrations of how queer fans experience queer melancholia (Wilson, 2015).

### **“Fantagonism”**

Contemporary online instances of marginalization such as the ones discussed in my Findings section align with and support Derek Johnson’s argument that fandom (that is, Fandom) contains contentious factions of disparate groups of fans (2007, 285-286). Television fandoms, in particular, comprise of many fandom groups that hold their own ideas, beliefs, and passions as a standard for active participation. These disparate beliefs among factions allow for boundary lines to be drawn and rigorously assessed, maintained, and renegotiated by group members. Johnson’s coining of the term “fantagonism” has inspired the ways in which we study the constitutive nature of hegemonic fandoms and how they interact with one another (285). Keeping the concept of “fantagonism” in mind may aid us further in theorizing queer fandom so that we may be able to better map out its existence within the larger realm of Fandom and its members’ constant (re)negotiations among each other as well as with those who wish to silence them in an effort to maintain the primacy of the traditional through heterosexist discourses such as those perpetuated in shows like *Once Upon a Time*.

To speak more on silence and repression, we turn to Foucault’s suppositions regarding the discourse of repression (Foucault, 1990, 17). Arguing that attempts to repress sexuality in

Victorian era England ultimately led to “an explosion” of discourse on the topic, Foucault illustrates that there was “an institutional incitement to speak about [sex], and to do so more and more” (Foucault, 1990, 18). This, of course, refers to heterocentric sex that can be “regulated for the greater good of all” (Foucault, 1990, 24). The agencies of power in relation to this project are the show runners and the fans that constitute the hegemonic Fandom for the show, as it is their actions and beliefs that control who can fall in love and have their own “Happily Ever After.” Moreover, it is these groups that control which narratives can be presented to the rest of the world even as Fandom undermines the legitimacy of counter narratives such as those developed by Swan Queen fans on Tumblr. Ultimately, I find that the gaslighting of Swan Queen fans by the show’s producers and anti-Swan Queen fans’ attempts at silencing the queer fandom are not new tactics in the slightest. Rather, it seems evident that a growing number of Swan Queen fans are agitated by these tactics intent to further marginalize them within Fandom. However, many are asking themselves and each other “why do we say we are oppressed or think we are oppressed?” (Foucault, 1990, 8-9)

### **Queer Melancholy: What Queer Fandom Offers Us**

What matters to me are the responses and reactions from the Swan Queen fandom to these (f)antagonisms. Queer resistance to hegemony is, in of itself, always a political act as one must acknowledge their dual role in the conflict as an individual fighting for one’s own rights (e.g. an affirming act) as well as part of a marginalized and demonized population of people throughout much of history (Butler, 1993). Cvetkovich (2003) insists that engagement with the past in the present demonstrates how important this type of melancholic state is for queer politics (cited in Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, 342). I think it safe to assume that many queer fandom members understand and acknowledge the history of oppression, death, and depression

that the AIDS crisis created during the 1980s and 1990s as well as the rapid coalescence of the queer community in response to media and the government's placement of blame and stigmatization on an already mourning population of queer individuals (Bersani, 1987; Crimp, 1989; Butler, 2004). They may also know that the queer community retains and curates feelings of what Cvetkovich (2003) and Butler (2004) refer to as queer melancholy even as new obstacles develop—such as seemingly frivolous “fandom wars” between straight and queer fans over their favorite television shows. Attending to both the past and the present from a queer fan's positionality requires one to know, deep down, that their existence in the world around them is contested and hated by some even as they themselves celebrate their queerness and seek out others like them in order to critically address the heterocentricity inherent, perpetuated, and endorsed in their favorite television shows.

To briefly sum up my thoughts, queer fandom offers a space to deconstruct heterocentric discourses such as “True Love” and “Happily Ever After” and reconstruct in their stead individualized ideations of what queer means through ever-changing and ever-growing relationships with our favorite characters. This space offers up endless potential for the kinds of queer world-building that queer theorists have been calling on for decades. Indeed, Berlant & Warner (1998) remind us that, “Heterosexuality involves so many practices that are not sex that a world in which this hegemonic cluster would not be dominant is, at this point, unimaginable. We are trying to bring that world into being” (557). Queer fandom, it seems, remains committed to doing the same.



## **VI. CONCLUSION: Reclaiming Their Own Space and Striving for a Queer “Happily Ever After”**

The purpose of my research has been to answer my research questions, of which there are two: First, how are members of the Swan Queen fan community developing counter narratives of love by engaging in meaning-making processes and interpretations of *Once Upon a Time* (OUAT)? And secondly, how do they talk about the purpose and importance of their narratives for themselves or the SQ fan community?

In answering the first question, I have determined that the majority of the fans in the Swan Queen fandom disagree with the storylines that developed during season 3 and created their own counter narratives (1) based upon their queer readings and interpretations of Regina and Emma’s characters, their interactions with one another, etc. Additionally, these queer fans (2) bond based on their similar interpretations of the show and discuss their reasons for shipping Swan Queen together. Most importantly, the Swan Queen fandom developed out of opposition to the show runners’ continued focus on and celebration of heterosexist representations of “True Love” and “Happily Ever After” in line with Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality (1980). Members of the Swan Queen fandom passionately argue that such representations of fairytale romance are potentially dangerous in that they portray and romanticize rape culture to audience members and that the show runners are complicit in this action even as they foreclose on the notion of a queer romance between Emma and Regina. As such, (3) Swan Queen fans reject the show’s narratives of these two notions through rejection of the canonical Captain Swan and Outlaw Queen relationships and push for more inclusive storylines and relationships.

Answering the second question, I found that Swan Queen fans maintain that the importance and purpose of their counter narratives is to engage with the fandom community because they (1) feel that the show is queerbaiting them and are attempting to counteract negative effects of queerbaiting, (2) use their narratives to critique the show's heterosexist storylines as empty and dangerous, and (3) respond to gaslighting by the show runners that then encourages (4) non-queer fans of *OUAT* to attack and threaten members of the Swan Queen fandom online.

The specific text posts displayed above and throughout my Findings section represent several types of antagonistic actions against Swan Queen fans and non-Swan Queen fans alike, as they promote aggressive and potentially harmful behaviors in the name of fandom alone. Thus, Swan Queen fans believe that it is part of their intervention, as a queer fandom and as fan activists, to utilize Tumblr as a queer counterpublic (Renninger, 2015) to highlight and address the aggressions and queerphobic rhetoric that has emerged in the online environment in an effort to re-claim and proclaim a safe space for themselves and to push for their own queer "Happily Ever After."

### **Scope and Limitations of the Research**

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen not to focus on certain aspects of the online Swan Queen fandom such as themed multimedia events, socials, and contests that are popular among fans that participate regularly; for example, wittyoncer creates fan fiction writing challenges with certain themes for each round where other fans can then submit their own works. In a similar vein, I have not included qualitative analyses of Swan Queen fan fiction published or crosslinked on Tumblr as it became clear very early on in data collection that such a project demanded more energy and time than I had allotted for myself. I have also chosen not to

examine the graphics (GIFS and videos) that wittyoncer posts or reblogs, as these graphics typically do not incorporate direct discussion between the blogger and other Swan Queen fans. This is not to say that these graphics bear no analytical fruit. On the contrary, any future attempts at analysis of GIF-use within queer fandom spaces would be greatly welcomed. In this project's case, textual posts proved to be the most abundant as well as extremely rich in data. As the specific timeframe I have chosen suggests, it is not possible to examine wittyoncer's (or other Swan Queen fans') reactions to events that occur before March 2014 and after December 2014.

The members of the Swan Queen fandom discussed in my analysis have formed both their own individualized understandings of queerness as well as a co-constructed, ever-changing one that circulates on Tumblr throughout the rest of the community. I believe it safe to assume that these fans' education levels contributed to the ways in which they discussed issues such as gaslighting, queerbaiting, and heteronormativity. Furthermore, as the content has been collected from an individual's blog, I cannot ignore the bias maintained throughout as it has been in wittyoncer's discretion to select which texts posts and topics pertaining to *Once Upon a Time* to reblog and comment on. Therefore, this study is not generalizable to the entire queer fandom community but may provide an example of comparison to others in the future. Additionally, it proves paramount that research on queer fandom studies such as the Swan Queen fandom observe and analyze the ways in which these fans perceive and contend with race and ethnicity as it presents itself within the show and filters in to online community blog spaces.

Lastly, I still find myself struck by the notion of queer fandom spaces such as Tumblr having to be heavily defended by its members from an influx of non-queer fans intent on silencing queer shipping practices and enforcing, instead, their own normalizing practices (Foucault, 1990, pp. 147). There are two questions I find myself asking at the moment: At what

cost(s) do members of a queer fandom defend their own space when there is no foreseeable relief on the horizon? For Swan Queen fans, in particular, what are their hopes and future outlooks for the queer fandom or for the show?

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## Appendix A

### **Glossary/Definition of Terms:**

***OUAT***: shorthand for *Once Upon a Time*

**Ship/Shipping**: a fandom activity wherein one participates in supporting the fictional relationship between two characters (often disregarding whether it is canonized or not)

**“Swan Queen”**: Swan Queen refers to any perceived romantic relationship between fictional characters Emma Swan and Regina Mills/The Evil Queen from *Once Upon a Time*

**“Captain Swan”**: This is the popular ship name chosen by fans of the romantic relationship between Captain Hook and Emma Swan.

**“Outlaw Queen”**: This is the popular ship name chosen by fans of the romantic relationship between Robin Hood and Regina Mills.

**IRL**: shorthand for “In real life”

**Handle/screen name**: the pseudo-identity one makes for Tumblr and other online communities

**Fan fiction**: fan-written stories featuring the characters, universe, and/or plot lines of a television show or other media such as film, books, comics, etc.

**Hashtags**: a tool on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr that is used to identify messages on a specific topic; identifiable by use of the pound symbol (#) preceding a word or string of words that convey discussion, tone, irony or humor, etc.



## Appendix B

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

January 30, 2017

Shannon Suddeth  
Women's & Gender Studies  
Saint Petersburg, FL 33705

RE: **Not Human Subjects Research Determination**

IRB#: Pro00029294

Title: (Dis)Enchanted: Queer and Lesbian Fans' Engagement with Once Upon a Time

Dear Ms. Suddeth:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application and determined the activities do not meet the definition of human subjects research. Therefore, this project is not under the purview of the USF IRB and approval is not required. If the scope of your project changes in the future, please contact the IRB for further guidance.

All research activities, regardless of the level of IRB oversight, must be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the ethical principles of your profession. Please note that there may be requirements under the HIPAA Privacy Rule that apply to the information/data you will utilize. For further information, please contact a HIPAA Program administrator at 813-974-5638.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of research at the University of South Florida. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristen Salomon", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board