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# "A Space Where Queer Is Normalized": The Online World and Fanfictions as Heterotopias for WLW

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**ABSTRACT**

In the current society, the online and fictional worlds are important spaces for both the identity construction and wellbeing of LGBTQ people. Connecting these spaces are fandoms (and fanfictions), which can operate as places of resistance for marginalized groups. Through the collection of survey data completed by 79 women loving women (WLW), this study therefore asks, in what ways does the online world, particularly in relation to fandoms, open up spaces for WLW. Employing a Foucauldian analysis, findings suggest communities online are crucial for affirmative support, and fanfictions are places where queerness is normalized. As such, through the displacement of time and space, online spaces (and particularly fanfictions) operate as heterotopias that significantly disrupt normative societal discourses. Accordingly, empathetic communities and the normal queer are notably absent from many WLW's physical worlds. However, caution is urged as these results are less clear for women of color.

**KEYWORDS**

Fanfiction; fandom studies; WLW; LGBTQ; online; Foucault; heterotopia

## Introduction

Within contemporary societies, media and the online world have become an integral part of people's lives. This is increasingly important for LGBTQ people who may be marginalized in the physical world and thus seeking alternative means of support or identity exploration. Specifically, the online world can operate as a site for making connections, forming communities, and cultivating identities that may be infeasible in the physical world (Downing, 2013; Pullen, 2010; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Moreover, as representation can help people make sense of themselves (Hall, 2013), media texts can facilitate both the recognition and validation of marginalized sexual identities. Connecting both the online world and media are online fandoms and fanfictions, which are stories adapted and reinterpreted by fans from canonical texts (Mackey & McClay, 2008). Due in part to the participatory nature, fandoms and fanfictions can operate as counter-sites to dominant narratives (Anselmo, 2018; Dym, Brubaker, Fiesler, & Semaan, 2019; Floegel, 2020; Jenkins, 1988; Hanmer, 2010, 2014), hence being an important space for those outside

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mainstream media and society (Dym & Fiesler, 2018). However, recent research (De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018; E. E. Thomas, 2019) highlights how fandoms may embrace both gender and sexuality diversity, this does not often stretch to diversity of race. This article builds on these ideas to explore what is possible for sections of the LGBTQ community in "Other" spaces of the online world in particular relation to fandoms and fanfictions.

Specifically, this article analyses online survey data from 79 self-identifying women loving women (WLW), which is a subset of LGBTQ. WLW is online terminology; hence, it was deemed appropriate for this study; furthermore, the study was explicitly open to anyone who identified as a woman. However, the use of WLW does exacerbate the binary gender divide and thus may have excluded people who identify as genderqueer or nonbinary. In this article, both acronyms WLW and LGBTQ are used, the former when referring to this research project and the latter as a catch-all when referring to research about the wider community; any other acronyms or terminologies arise from direct quotations. Within this, the use of any acronym is not meant as a value judgment about the terminology.

Using survey data and Foucauldian theory, this article analyses how spaces within the online world, particularly fanfictions, can operate as heterotopias —"a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Specifically, I argue that these heterotopic spaces enable forms of resistance to power and discourse that are not currently possible in the normative physical world. Within this, I consider how these forms of resistance play out and furthermore if these online spaces privilege some WLW over others.

Before explaining the methods and theoretical framework for analysis, I first set out the background literature and context of the study in reference to LGBTQ people, online spaces and fandoms.

## Background literature and context

### *LGBTQ and online space*

Usage of new media is integrated into our everyday lives (Livingstone, 2008). Moreover, recent research (Byron, Albury, & Evers, 2013; Metcalfe & Llewellyn, 2020) suggests there is flow between the physical and online worlds in terms of identity construction. As such, structural and social categories that are found in the physical world are often replicated, or have precedence, online. The online world, therefore, has not become "the great equaliser" (Boyd, 2014, p. 23), which early scholarship anticipated it might. However, there is a body of research (Downing, 2013; Hanmer, 2014; Pettid, 2008; Pullen & Cooper, 2010) that suggests for LGBTQ people the online world can be enabling and empowering. Place and space are central to LGBTQ people, who

operate within physical societies that are commonly cisgender, heteronormative or heterosexist. Within this positioning, the online world has the potential to become a relative safe space—ranging from societies where LGBTQ is illegal, to where LGBTQ is accepted but non-normative.

LGBTQ people are unique in that their social minority status is not intergenerational. As such, the ameliorating influence that families can provide may be absent (Gonsiorek, 1993; Pullen, 2010). Moreover, as society constructs heterosexuality as compulsory (Rich, 1980) being LGBTQ can be isolating even within secure friendships. The online world, therefore, can be vital in providing help to navigate both "emotional and geographical isolation" (Pettid, 2008, p. 182). This support takes a range of forms, including access to information concerning diverse sexualities, as well as connections with other LGBTQ people and communities (Downing, 2013; Pullen, 2010).

The online world can also provide a relatively safe method of identity exploration within a public space (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). LGBTQ people can play with one's identity without relative "fear of recognition or judgment" (Hanmer, 2010, p. 152), which can be challenging for LGBTQ people in society where legitimized identities are given precedence. However, the online world may have aspects of empowerment and safety, but it should not be read as an LGBTQ utopia. For instance, in his work on non-heterosexual youth, Downing (2013) found that "online interactions sometimes marginalized groups of non-heterosexual young people in parallel with exclusion in offline LGBT spaces" (p. 54), for example, around ethnicity, disability or performances of legitimized identities.

### *LGBTQ fandoms and online space*

Fandom studies have long been established as participatory (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Radway, 1984), with users reworking and remodeling canonical texts with their own cultural interpretations. Fandoms, therefore, operate as a "vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups" (Jenkins, 1988, p. 87) that enable a form of resistance to dominant narratives. This disruption has been amplified by fandom's significant use of online spaces. The less regulated Web 2.0 (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014) has amplified the pace, accessibility and consumption of fandoms (Hanmer, 2010, 2014; Ng, 2008; Tushnet, 2007; Waggoner, 2018). As such, creating further avenues and spaces outside traditional power networks.

Within this disruption, multiple research studies have established that online fandoms can be places of empowerment and agency for LGBTQ people (Anselmo, 2018; Dym et al., 2019; Hanmer, 2010, 2014; Lamerichs, 2018). In the first instance, just as in early fandom research, this involves reshaping canonical narratives and the exploration of identity. For instance, Ng (2008), suggests that cultural production of music videos allows fans to develop same-

sex relationships beyond what was shown onscreen. Hanmer (2010, 2014), who explored lesbian fans of the 90s television show Xena: Warrior Princess, takes this further, finding that fan reworkings of texts enabled them to explore their identities resulting in increased "self-esteem and personal empowerment" (Hanmer, 2010, p. 155). In addition, recent evidence (Dym et al., 2019) highlights the importance of both the online platform and the community, in enabling LGBTQ people to construct positive narratives and identities. This is central to LGBTQ people as positive representations of LGBTQ people are often absent from both media and society.

Hence, fandoms can be empowering and enable identity work through engagement in communities; however, there is emotional investment that comes from shared interests and the attached elevated significance (Lamerichs, 2018; Stein, 2015). In her exploration of fan labor, Anselmo (2018) critiques this further arguing that the practices that fans engage in are "emotional, creative, therapeutic, often unremunerated and unappreciated labor … at turns joyous and grievous" (p. 85). She signals the high stakes that are involved in practices that seek to legitimize what is absent from LGBTQ people's worlds, and therefore positions fandom as being a space of both empowerment and vulnerability.

A further criticism of fandoms concerns the homogeneity of the communities that are available, and therefore there should be caution around the inclusivity of LGBTQ spaces. Specifically, the fact that fan cultures and their reimagined stories are predominantly white cisgender and thus can exclude LGBTQ people of color (De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018); De Kosnik and Carrington (2019) suggest this is even more explicit for women of color in fandoms. Furthermore, LGBTQ fandoms often reproduce heteronormative narratives of monogamy, hence producing acceptable versions of LGBTQ (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017; Ng, 2008). As such, it is possible that LGBTQ fandoms, just as in the wider online world, reproduce structural privileges that are present offline.

### *Fanfictions and representation*

The importance of canonical media representation for LGBTQ people is well established in scholarly research (Gross, 2001; Hanmer, 2010, 2014; Jenkins, 1995; Ng, 2008; Waggoner, 2018); arguably, the lack of representation can be harmful in media abundant societies as it maintains the marginalized, marginalized (Dym et al., 2019). Whilst LGBTQ fans have historically employed queer readings through the subtexts of heterosexual texts (Doty, 1993), some of which have enabled movements beyond reductive readings of LGBTQ representation (see Hanmer, 2010, 2014 or Ng, 2008). These are always enacted from the position of LGBTQ as deficit or absent. Furthermore, whilst recent years have seen increased representation of LGBTQ on screen, much of

this is stereotypical and often employs repetitive and harmful tropes of LGBTQ people (Waggoner, 2018). Arguably, this curtailed representation limits the understanding of the self (Hall, 2013) and perpetuates discourses of the same and the Other (Foucault, 1970/2002). Hence, a powerful aspect of fandoms is fanfictions, which are principally reimagined stories adapted from canonical texts; they are cultural stories which reshape the reductive representations within the media. As such, they generate a level of "visualisation" of identities that move beyond societal and media stereotypes (Dym et al., 2019, p. 20).

In early fandom research, Bacon-Smith (1992) demonstrated that female fandoms are diverse communities, whose reworkings of canonical texts support fans' own cultural interpretations. More recently, both Hanmer (2014) and Berger (2010) claimed that fanfictions are central to lesbian fandom identities exploration and normalization that can be missing from the physical world or media texts. Broader LGBTQ research suggests that the retelling and reimagining of stories can be a place for LGBTQ identity exploration and may also be a place for political activism (Dym et al., 2019; Hanmer, 2014). Hence, the use of online fanfictions utilizes the potentially disruptive power not only of online space but also of storytelling and that stories are "generated and experienced" (B. Thomas, 2011, p. 6) rather than static objects. Furthermore, they enable LGBTQ people to tell their own stories, which they are rarely given the opportunity to do (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015). Hence, "fan fiction, too, is the literature of the subordinate" (Derecho, 2006, p. 72), where women and the LGBTQ fans can move beyond the confines of cisgender and heteronormativity or of the degenerate Other.

This disruption can apply to both writers of fanfiction and readers. Drawing on both Foucault and De Certeau, McNamee (2000) writes:

> Reading is an activated space, a 'secret scene': . . . "to read is to be elsewhere, where *they* are not, in another world, it is to constitute a secret scene, a place one can enter and leave when one wishes. (De Certeau, 1984, p. 173)" (489, 490)

McNamee argues that for girls reading may be a heterotopic secret place. Her arguments include that girls can be positioned as Other to boys who dominate physical space, and furthermore girls are Other to adults who control and facilitate children's space. There are similarities between McNamee's reading of children, and LGBTQ as Other within society and physical space. Crucially, McNamee states that whilst reading, children "are not bounded by anything other than . . . imagination" (p. 490). Similarly, LGBTQ people reading these stories can invest in relationships and subject positions that are not readily available in society or media. However, E. E. Thomas (2019) argues that whilst online culture offers opportunity, the "collective imagination" is constrained by the lack of representation within fiction, which is particularly detrimental for people of color who are never the hero and always the Other. She

persuasively argues that fantasy itself is reliant on the dark Other as the antithesis to the protagonist. Although she suggests writing, rather than just reading, does offer spaces for negotiation. Hence, whilst reading and writing fanfiction can enable latitude beyond the limited representation of LGBTQ found on screen, this may be more complex for LGBTQ people of color, who lack representation in both spaces.

Hence, in this study, it is my intention not to romanticize fanfictions and fandoms as utopias, and instead see the complexities within what is enabled. I am aware that fandoms may provide places of access and community for some, yet may also construct barriers for others; moreover, whilst I use the phrases LGBTQ and WLW and move between them, I am cautious over homogenizing each category and aware of the differences between them. More broadly, I am conscious that fandoms do not operate cordially; indeed, there are disagreements within fandoms and affiliations may change (Hills, 2005; B. Thomas, 2011). In relation, rather than following the first wave of fandom (such as Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 1992), and reading power as a binary divide between the powerful and the powerless (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrrington, 2007), I employ a Foucauldian theoretical framework, which has a capillary view of power and space. Moreover, as heterotopias are relational, the analysis is able to consider what is present in the online space and what is absent in the counter-site. The details of which are explained below, as well as the justification that online spaces and fanfictions can be read as heterotopias.

## Theoretical framework

Whilst heterotopias are not written about in depth by Foucault, Elden (2001) argues that they form a central aspect of his approach to analysis. For Foucault, heterotopias encourage the playing with traditional normativities found within society, they are "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). As such, heterotopias disrupt the "order of things" (Foucault, 1970/2002), and what we perceive as a "régime of truth . . . that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131), discourse being "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972/2002, p. 54).

Heterotopias have varied forms but several principles in common. Specifically, they are places that play with societies normative constructions of time and space. Foucault (1986) explains: "heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time-which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies." (p. 26); this can take the form of "eternal" time found in cemeteries or museums or "temporal" time located in carnivals of traveling fairgrounds. In general (literal),

"technologies . . . shrink our notions of time and space" (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 1). Specifically, for the online world, time and distance between geographical spaces no longer exists in a physical sense. "The plasticity of time within new media and emerging real-time technologies remove the temporal boundaries of the actual world." (Rymarczuk & Derksen, 2014). Moreover, time in the online world can be both eternal and temporal. For instance, articles and comments can be posted and immediately deleted hence implying temporality; however, texts may be recycled, tagged, or uncovered after deletion, hence inferring eternality.

Space "itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard fatal intersection of time with space" (Foucault, 1986, p. 22); hence, space is also disrupted within heterotopias. Space and place are produced through process, they are "worked out through social action in ways that ceaselessly change over time" (Ek, 2006, p. 51). As Other spaces, heterotopias can disrupt the normative processes and power—including heteronormativity and cisnormativity—within which society functions. For Foucault, power is controlling but also enabling such that power creates, and people have a constrained agency within technologies of domination (Foucault, 1980a). Moreover, power "is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (Foucault, 1980b, p. 98) as such, people are always caught in its production; the subject produces and is produced by power.

The online world is a (literal and Foucauldian) technology which controls, yet also offers space for agency (Pullen, 2010) and resistance to domination. Whilst discussing a mirror as a heterotopia, Foucault (1986) states: "I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface . . . it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal" (p. 24) which correlates to the online world. The online world is a virtual space that operates within and between both the real and the unreal; the online world does not leave behind the physical world, but functions beside it, moving within the discourses and subject positions that are available. The online world is, however, not a singular space (Young, 1998), and fanfictions are specific places within this Other space. Hence, online space and the specific site of fanfictions can both be considered as heterotopias. Fanfictions therefore share heterotopic traits of the online world, such that they play with time and space. However, these traits are enhanced, as storytelling can also be read as a heterotopia (McNamee, 2000), through the creation of other places and worlds.

There are similar research projects that examine how heterotopias can disrupt power. As discussed, McNamee (2000) discusses the opportunities children can gain from playing video games or reading; moreover, children can be read as other to adults within society, just as WLW are othered by heteronormativity. WLW are similarly (although more surreptitiously)

"policed and controlled" (McNamee, 2000, p. 479) as children are by adults. Other research sees Rymarczuk and Derksen (2014) explore Facebook as a heterotopia. They argue that Facebook both attracts and repulses users, for instance, by placing the past within the present. Specifically related to fanfiction, Bury (2005) explores online female fandoms and notes "cyberspaces as potentially heterotopic in their reworking and transgressing of normative spatial practices and relations" (p. 18). Drawing on this work, Rambukkana (2007), outlines an argument for "slash networks as queer heterotopias" (p. 75); slash referring to fanfictions concerning same-sex relationship pairings. Similar to McNamee (2000), Wilkinson (2012), in her work on young adult (YA) fiction and fanfictions, argues that both can be heterotopias; as in children, YAs are similarly excluded from normative adult spaces. Hence, following Foucault (1986) and the scholars listed above, this article examines online space and fanfictions as heterotopias with the purpose of asking what do heterotopic spaces permit that normative spaces in society do not. Concurrently, arguing that fandoms and fanfictions are heterotopias that allow for resistance to power.

## Methods

This article focuses on the results from survey data that were administered online during July and August 2018 and was advertised through my Twitter handle. In addition, several key individuals were purposively targeted, and retweets were gained from fanfiction writers, web content writers, and LGBTQ academics. Hence, the participants were found using a mixture of targeted, snowball (Browne, 2005) and respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn, 1997). These strategies are often used in gaining access to hard-to-reach communities (Baltar & Brunet, 2012); snowball sampling being particularly common within research on diverse sexualities (Bell, 1997).

The online aspect of the survey matched the topic of the study. Furthermore, several strengths of surveys suited the research design, which included: "global reach; flexibility, speed, convenience, question diversity, low administration cost, large sample, easy to obtain, ease of data" (Evans & Mathur, 2005, p. 197). Evans and Mathur (2005) also highlight several weaknesses of online surveys including "skewed attribute of internet or respondents online" (p. 197); however, this survey deliberately sought a skewed sample around those interested in the topic and who were engaged online. This both conforms and contrasts to previous research on fan communities, much of which is ethnographic in nature (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Radway, 1984; Waggoner, 2018) or incorporates similar techniques such as in-depth interviews or textual analysis (Anselmo, 2018; Dym et al., 2019; Floegel, 2020; Hanmer, 2014; Ng, 2008; Pande, 2018). In relation, a strength of ethnographic or interview data is the opportunity to explain and engage with participants. In

contrast, however, online surveys can be "impersonal; and contain unclear instructions" (Evans & Mathur, 2005). To mitigate this, the survey was piloted with two participants. Moreover, the questions encouraged extended text responses from participants, with the aim of gaining discursive data. The participants, therefore, had some freedom of response without the intervention of a researcher. Alternatively, the lack of interaction from the researcher meant the participants' ideas were not probed during the data collection process. As such, this study provides a snapshot of the present situation with regards to online fandoms; however, it recommends that further in-depth research is carried out in particular areas (highlighted in the results section).

For this survey, the participant information explicitly stated:

> this research project is interested in listening to the opinions and experiences of WLW* [women who love women], particularly in relation to two spaces – the online world (social media and fan activities) and the fictional television/film world. I am interested in finding out how important these places are for WLW and if so why? - *the study is open to anyone who identifies as a woman.

This article focuses on the results specifically related to the online world and fan activities. The survey contained 10 discussion questions and six information questions. The participants were informed the survey should take between 20 and 30 minutes. The discussion questions answers were predominantly free text boxes, which were often preceded by a scale rating; for example: "On a scale of 1–10 [10 being changed massively], in relation to being a WLW, have your experiences online changed anything about your life in the physical/offline world?" Careful consideration was given to the order and text of the questions, with the initial questions focusing on media and representation, before moving onto the online world and fandoms. The final question was open and asked the participants to add anything extra. The survey was designed so all questions were optional; however, this was reiterated before the six information questions that requested respondents: age, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, country of residence and relationship status. These questions were designed to gain an understanding of the survey participants, rather than to make causal inferences against categories of people.

Seventy-nine people completed the survey. Their ages fitted a normal distribution, with a range from 'under 18′ to 'over 75′, with the majority falling between 25 and 44. The majority of participants were from the USA and UK, followed by Western Europe and Canada, with some respondents from wider areas including Malta, South Africa, Brazil and Australia. Four participants identified themselves as non-binary; three as genderqueer/fluid, and 72 as either female or cis woman. The majority identified as lesbian or gay, with 15 people identifying as bisexual or pansexual and a small amount as queer; some participants stated more than one category, for example, gay/lesbian/queer. Three respondents were Black or mixed race, one South

Asian, two Latinx, and 73 were white. Hence, there was a broad range of respondents, but the majority were white, from Western countries, and identified as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, as the survey was written in English, this may have been a barrier of access for other potential participants.

A Foucauldian analysis (Carabine, 2001), was carried out through multiple readings of the data. This involved thematic analysis (Willig, 2014) both within and between questions, looking for both commonalities and points of divergence. The analysis from the survey is supplemented by my own knowledge as a white cisgender lesbian reader of fanfiction. Hence, this study has some aspects of insider research, which is prevalent in "political orientated" LGB research (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015, p. 94), poststructural research (Taylor, 2001), and fandom research. However, I am aware of moving beyond my own positioning, and hence employ self-reflexivity as a part of the research process (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Specifically, I position myself as an intrigued and invested fan, rather than as a fervent consumer or producer of content. Moreover, I am conscious that my reading and the predominantly white cisgender sample have forms of privilege.

The study was endorsed by my institutions ethical committee. Participants were informed they did not have to answer every question, and they could withdraw consent at any point.

## Results and discussion

My findings corroborate previous research (Anselmo, 2018; Dym et al., 2019; Floegel, 2020; Hanmer, 2014; Lamerichs, 2018; Ng, 2008; Pullen & Cooper, 2010; Waggoner, 2018), and strongly suggest that the online world, fandoms and fanfictions can play a crucial role in the lives and well-being of WLW. Eighty-six percent of the respondents stated that the online world was very important to them as WLW (rating 7, 8, 9, or 10 out of 10)—the most common answer being 10 (34%); hence corroborating the interests of those conducting the survey. However, similarities are found in the answer to the question: "in relation to being a WLW, have your experiences online changed anything about your life in the physical/offline world?"; the most common response of 10 (35%) was similarly high, with 66% of responders choosing 7 or above, and 74% choosing 6 or above. Hence, implying that online space significantly impacts the respondents' physical worlds. The rest of this article presents three central thematic findings in detail: first that the online community is a mode of validity and acceptance for WLW, and second that online fanfictions are places where queer is normalized. The final theme explores the limitations of these positions through the homogeneity of the sample; particularly as "whiteness structures the Internet (Noble, 2018) and scholarship of fanfiction" (Floegel, 2020, p. 799).

As such, this article offers evidence that online worlds can provide significant disruption to normative physical spaces; hence, they operate as heterotopias. Accordingly, as heterotopias are a "space of illusion that exposes real space" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27), an accepting community and LGBTQ as normal are absent from many participants' physical worlds. However, and with the limited sample, these assertions are less clear for people of color.

### *Community: "Where most WLW feel accepted"*

Throughout, respondents highlighted the difficulties of living in a community that is dominated by heterosexuals and hostile to WLW: as one states: "about 99% of the time I'm only surrounded by straight people, many/most of them homophobic. The online world is sometimes the only place I can even exist as a WLW." In spite of their alienation, the respondent has access to an online community and subsequently a place that negates "emotional and geographical isolation" (Pettid, 2008, p. 182). Similarly, they "feel less guarded" online, suggesting many WLW who access online communities are profoundly lacking support in their physical worlds. Furthermore, the fact that respondents have to be more "guarded" in their physical worlds suggests there are reasons to consciously hide their sexuality. This includes respondents isolated in "conservative communities" and those who did not know other WLW, one stating: "I wouldn't have really found a community otherwise." A further respondent stated that they are "less likely to hide who I am," demonstrating alienation but also that sexuality is a prominent construction of identity in Western society (Foucault, 1978/1998). This latter point is reiterated by other respondents, with one stating: "I can speak openly about my (female) partner and not have to worry about judgment." This respondent demonstrates the need of individuals to engage in "open" conversations about their partners (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). However, as before, being "open" may also be premised upon the "truth" of the subject being framed around sexuality (Foucault, 1978/1998). This positioning can affect both WLW's construction of self and production through others; as one respondent states "online I get to be my complex queer self. Offline I'm just a lesbian to most people." Hence, online spaces provide opportunities for WLW to be their sexuality but not to be constrained by their sexuality, which are privileges readily afforded to many heterosexual people.

Importantly, support in the online world moves beyond positioning sexuality as reductive; as one respondent stated: "our love is celebrated, and that's truly wonderful." In the physical world, it is possible that the converse may happen—that the relationship may be prohibited by law or by the immediate community or family; it could also be that the relationship is tolerated but sidelined—tolerance being a "beacon of multicultural justice and civic peace" (Brown, 2006, p. 1). Similar statements are made by other respondents, many

emphasizing the high level of support received from online communities: [there is] "more openness, support and positivity online." Hence, as before both the opportunity to be open and receive valid advocations are singled out as present online, online people are: "much more accepting of everyone" (states another respondent). Again, it is the positivity of the support that is highlighted, which suggests that this is unusual in the physical world. In society, "if the 'queer' is often publicly tolerated and sometimes even celebrated, it is only within certain limits" (Jackson & Scott, 2004, p. 238); Smith (1997) terms this the "good homosexual" as opposed to the "dangerous queer," the latter may actively exhibit their sexuality transgressing boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. Moreover, being LGBTQ may be framed around being at risk, in both society and the media (Dhaenens, 2013). As such, it is possible that support in the physical world is premised upon LGBTQ as deficit. That online is "where most WLW feel accepted" clearly signals the disconnect between many sectors of society and WLW, moreover that support has to be aligned to legitimacy and acceptance.

A few respondents explained that the online world helped them to explore their sexual identity, one explicitly stated: "I realized I was a lesbian" whilst others said they were "out online first," suggesting online is a way to test one's sexual identity safely (Dym et al., 2019; Hanmer, 2010; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Moreover, for some WLW, it can help to gain a sense of security, several respondents stated variations of: "I've become more comfortable and confident in my sexuality because of friends online." This can come from the substantive and positive acceptance of the community—the use of "friends" constructs a close relationship but may also be from the "new" information that the respondent finds online (Downing, 2013; Pullen, 2010). Crucial to this is what one respondent points out as the online world giving both "a sense of freedom and belonging." Respondents have the freedom to explore or express their sexual identities whilst fitting into a community; as a further respondent clarifies: "I can't overstate the importance of the community." Thus, suggesting community and belonging may be absent from the respondents' physical spaces. This may be heightened for WLW, who are an ostracized social minority, that do not share familial intergenerationally (Gonsiorek, 1993; Pullen, 2010). Instead, online space may be about "finding people with mutual interests" or it may be experienced as "a place where like-minded individuals can gather together over WLW." Hence, not only do online spaces allow for WLW to congregate and connect but there is a WLW centric togetherness that may not be possible in heteronormative and cisgender societies. As one respondent states: "it's important in knowing I'm not alone"; again, indicating isolation within physical spaces.

Therefore, as in heterotopias, WLW are able to use online space to disrupt discourses and power relations present in their physical world. Specifically, online WLW feel valued, supported, and that their sexuality is celebratory

rather than constraining. Thus, indicating these positions are absent from many participants' physical spaces. LGBTQ people can experience "both conscious and unconscious microaggressions" in society (Nadal et al., 2011, p. 234). Within this, they can experience a range of exclusions, including being reduced to and negatively positioned by their sexuality. The online world disrupts many of these detrimental normativities. As one respondent sadly states: "being able to exist as a WLW with other members of the LGBTQ community has, at times been the only things that has kept me alive," which demonstrates the power of sexuality as an indicator of identity (Foucault, 1978/1998), yet also the marginalization experienced by WLW in the counter-site of contemporary society.

### *Representation: "A space where queer is normalized"*

The second finding is that there is evidence from the data that fanfictions—a place within the space of the online world—act as heterotopias. Specifically, a "heterotopia disturbs and unsettles wherever it sheds its light: cultural spaces, disciplinary borders and notions of subjectivity" (Johnson, 2013, p. 800). In the case of this article, the heterotopia/fanfiction disturbs the heteronormative, and in some contexts heterosexist and cissexist, order that formulates contemporary society. This "régime of truth," and its consequent limitations are also present within media and fictional texts. Furthermore, for Foucault, this production of meaning is part of a "three-dimensional constellation including discourse, knowledge, and power, … that is, both invaded and controlled, constituted as an object formulated in 'truth' and defined as an object, as the target of a possible knowledge" (Foucault, 1989, p. 162). Hence, any object or consequent subject position—for example, WLW—are produced by the relations between power and knowledge and discourse, which includes culture and representation. As Hall (2013) points out "culture is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subject and historical events—not merely a reflection of the world after the event." (p. xxi). Within this, the media plays a key part in any discursive (re)production. Hence, fanfictions (which purposefully utilize media texts) produce subject positions for WLW that are not readily (re) presented in the dominantly hetero, physical or fictional worlds; fanfictions, therefore, actively disrupt the "order of things" that maintains the same and the Other (Foucault, 1970/2002).

In the first instance, this applies to fanfictions derived from onscreen media, such as television and film; as one respondent points out: "people like me aren't usually seen on TV." Hence, there is power within seeing yourself on screen and immense significance attached to canonical representation of LGBTQ (Dym et al., 2019; Gross, 2001; Hanmer, 2010, 2014; Jenkins, 1995; Ng, 2008; Waggoner, 2018); another respondent states a particular television

show as the "first time I felt seen." In simple terms, the presence of a WLW body creates knowledge that WLW exist; this is especially important for marginalized groups where the minority status is not always written on the body. Currently, WLW experience increased visibility onscreen, although there are limitations to this representation (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017; Waggoner, 2018). This is corroborated by another respondent: "fanfiction is a way of escaping and developing these characters when sometimes the actual writing fails them." "Developing" characters suggests that there are inadequacies in onscreen representation, whilst "escaping" signifies further the need to move away from problematic, dominant representation. Evidence from wider research (Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Herman, 2005; Waggoner, 2018) suggests that LGBTQ characters are often secondary and have limited development beyond their sexuality; hence, WLW's position is substantiated as the inferior Other. Dow (2001) specifically argues that LGBTQ plotlines are often used for histrionic storylines, rather than as valid character development. More recently, and as the presence of WLW increases, storylines tend to focus on "relationship and interpersonal issues instead of accurate representations of WLW persons" (Waggoner, 2018, p. 1878). As one respondent states fanfiction is "the one time I feel represented and isn't based on an image of WLW to help get men off," whilst another confirms: fanfiction is "where sex and intimacy between women isn't questioned or turned into a spectacle." Hence, it is possible that considerable onscreen representation is not premised upon the needs of WLW. In contrast, fanfiction invariably is, as one respondent clarifies, fanfiction "fixes str8 bullshit and makes it gayer."

Fanfiction thus serves a purpose that is not currently provided by a significant proportion of onscreen media. It is a place where WLW can center their own stories and perspectives, which is not often feasible in the broader media (Klein et al., 2015). As such, the needs of WLW are more readily met by the creators of fanfiction, who also have a clear comprehension of the repetitive and reductive storylines that permeate WLW fiction; as one respondent confirms, fanfiction is "more than the tired tropes we see on TV." Waggoner's (2018) research examines the prominence of the "bury your gays" trope; "bury your gays" being a modern reformulation of Dow's (2001) overly dramatic storylines that serve to boost ratings. Arguably therefore, there is a level of cognizance within WLW that derives from limited onscreen representation.

Moreover, whilst many fanfictions may conform to heteronormative ideals about romance (Ng, 2017), they often take place in worlds that differ vastly from physical societies experienced by WLW. From my reading of fanfiction, a huge amount of fanfiction operates in a place where prejudice and violence against WLW are absent. As such, the rules of heteronormative society do not exist. Instead, a considerable amount of fanfiction takes place in spaces where being a woman who loves another woman is a normative part of society and is

not framed as deficit or merely tolerated; tolerance being "a mode of late modern governmentality that iterates the normalcy of the powerful and the deviance of the marginal" (Brown, 2006, p. 8). As one respondent states "fanfiction is so gay"; illustrating that the representation of sexuality in fanfiction is purposefully WLW positive or centric, and furthermore, that this position is absent from the physical or online world. "Fanfiction has made me prouder to be gay," states another respondent, which again suggests that WLW in fanfiction are (re)produced very differently than within normative media and society. Specifically, as in the discussion in the previous section, WLW are celebrated. This is not present within the majority of society, where being LGBTQ is predominantly Othered. Fanfiction instead presents a version of society where diverse sexualities are not marginalized, thus actively disrupting the normative status quo within society; to quote one respondent, "fanfiction—. . . [is] a space where queer is normalized."

Beyond fanfiction, there are other fictional genres (such as fantasy or science fiction), that allow for disordering the discourses of sexuality, although it should be noted these often do not include people of color (Thomas, 2019). Citing horror as another example, Doty (1993) argued that queer discourses are found within the texts of heterosexual stories, indeed much fanfiction is written about heterosexual pairings. As one respondent stated: "for media that is not explicitly queer, conversations, fanfic, and further analyses of subtext in media helps me feel validated"; suggesting that there are ways of resisting power and gaining validation outside of WLW representation. Moreover, the respondent may be supporting Doty's (1993) argument that sub-texts should not be framed as such, and that "queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (Doty, 1993, p. xvii). Hence, it is possible to ask if queer can be normalized, when "queer refers to anyone who feels marginalised by mainstream visions of sexuality" (Morris, 2000, p. 21). Even if queer (in the respondent quotation and the title of this article) is used as a catch-all for LGBTQ, it will still function as different within cisgender and heteronormative societies. Thus, it is possible that queer heterotopic spaces, such as fanfiction, will always have purpose as they enable resistance to discursive dominance.

### *The limits of heterotopia: "Culturally homogenous"*

However, in spite of the general empowering narrative within the responses, there are small deviations that query the extent to which online spaces and fanfictions are heterotopic spaces for all LGBTQ, particularly in relation to age and race. One respondent noted that the fandoms and WLW spaces can be "culturally homogenous," with another stating "WLW of color tend to be ignored." Another participant was clearly able to map the marginalization between physical and online spaces: "I'm older and Black, so often I'm still

on the fringes." This was mirrored in comments about wider media representation in TV and film. "There is a lack of butch characters, [and] a lack of QWOC [queer women of colour]" states one. Another response is similar but more hopeful: "I think overwhelmingly the representation of WLW on TV and film is of white, femme lesbians. The representation of black, other minority ethnic, trans* or overtly bisexual characters is lacking although seems to be gradually improving." This is corroborated by McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2017), who argue that onscreen representations of WLW habitually "affirm ideals of hetero-patriarchal, white femininity" (p. 315). However, some white cisgender participants expressed awareness of homogeneity and privilege: "I guess this means I was pretty lucky growing up as a white, femme, cisgender lesbian to have access to multiple characters I could relate to," although what is unclear from my data is how they responded to this in WLW online spaces.

These findings demonstrate both limitations of survey style questions, which cannot be adapted during the research process, and the limitations of the largely homogenous sample of participants. Hence, as Floegel (2020) advocated in their research, further exploration is needed, particularly using research methods (such as targeted interviews or participatory action research) that unpack LGBTQ homogeneity. In particular, it is possible that this study, with its lack of adaptability, may reproduce the whiteness that is present both online (Noble, 2018) and in fandom research (Floegel, 2020).

Broader than this, it is important to state that both online fanfictions nor the greater online world were utopias—respondents also mentioned: "mob mentality," "negative energy" and the "pressure to perform on platforms," with some drawing attention to their older age: "but it does get cliquey and if you are older it's best to hang back"; arguably, this is to be expected with interactions between people, indeed being aware of negative patterns suggests a reflective cognizance of the participants. Furthermore, these comments were very small in comparison to the overwhelming number of responses that were framed positively, with one respondent stating, "90% of fandoms are very welcoming and open." Words such as "fun" or "delightful" were frequently used to frame WLW's experiences of fanfictions, suggesting there is emotion and feeling attached to fandoms (Anselmo, 2018; Lamerichs, 2018; Stein, 2015). Moreover, this positivity may be missing from reductive media and society representations of LGBTQ people. As one respondent states: "fanfiction is a place of healing for me," which further indicates what is both present within fanfictions, and what is simultaneously absent from respondents' physical worlds. Furthermore, it is an indication of the significance of heterotopias in that they are more than the imagined utopian space, they are able to offer real disruption to power and discourse within society and the physical world.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have interpreted data from a survey aimed at WLW who are attracted to online fandoms. Thus, I was not seeking generalization but instead to explore the importance of the online world, fandoms, and fanfictions, to this specific group of people. Accordingly, an aim was to suggest what is both present and absent within WLW's lives. Corroborating previous research (Hanmer, 2014; Ng, 2008; Pullen & Cooper, 2010; Waggoner, 2018), my findings suggest that the online world can be hugely significant for WLW for several reasons. In particular, as in the work of Pullen (2010) and Downing (2013) I have highlighted the importance of the community that is present online and who support WLW in feeling both valued and praised; thus, indicating that these experiences may be absent from WLW's physical worlds. This is different from research on normative populations that suggests physical and offline worlds are co-constitute (e.g., Byron et al., 2013; Metcalfe & Llewellyn, 2020). It is evident from my survey that the physical world does not operate as a safe or queer centric place for WLW, this instead can be provided by the online world and particular spaces within it. Hence, agreeing with previous research (Bury, 2005; Rambukkana, 2007; Wilkinson, 2012) I suggest that through the disorder of time and space, the online world can operate as a heterotopia which actively disrupts discursive formations present in the physical world; this is vitally important for WLW as a marginalized group within normative society. Moreover, WLW are not merely supported, but their acceptance is framed positively around celebration, and not through the deficit of tolerance which maintains WLW as Other to the dominant order (Brown, 2006). Within this, WLW can be their sexuality, but crucially are positioned as more than their sexuality, which may not occur in either their physical or fictional worlds.

By applying a Foucauldian reading, and building on previous research (Anselmo, 2018; Dym et al., 2019; Hanmer, 2010, 2014; Lamerichs, 2018), I suggest that these points are heightened for online fandoms. Here, fans are active participants, and fanfictions actively correct heteronormativity through re-writing discursive formations found with society and media. As such, fanfictions are non-normative places (through stories) within non-normative spaces (through online) that allow for the disruption of time, space, and the "order of things" (Foucault, 1970/2002). By creating stories outside discursive norms, fanfictions are heightened heterotopias that actively disorder discourse, power and knowledge and enact WLW centric spaces. Hence, fanfictions operate alongside, but significantly outside, the "régime of truth" (Foucault, 1980a), that is cisgender and heteronormativity and the absence of representation in both society and media texts.

However, there are limitations to these findings that suggest the need for both reflection and further research. In particular, there is a need to explore the homogeneity of WLW in online spaces, and to further ask if these spaces reproduce or contest certain forms of privilege. It is possible online fandoms could be isolating

for LGBTQ people of color who experience intersectional forms of oppression. Furthermore, as the analysis that is presented is from a snapshot of survey data, there is a need to investigate further points that both conform and disrupt the findings presented, particularly with the sample being predominantly white cisgender.

In summary, I suggest that even with my restricted sample, online spaces and the spaces within fanfictions are exceptionally powerful. For WLW, the online world and fanfictions operate as queer centric, from the WLW who are positioned as deviant, to the many who feel ostracized by heteronormativity. Within this, fiction is critical, as representation can aid WLW in perceiving themselves as valued. These online spaces are not static or uniform but can be experienced by WLW as heterotopic spaces that transform discursive boundaries that limit WLW within society. Fanfictions particularly enable WLW to create their own narratives, thus flipping the narrative of queer as the counter-site that operates within society. As such, these Foucauldian Other spaces, offer places for Others, but on their terms.

Subsequently, WLW centric fanfiction deserves to be more than trivialized, when for many "fanfiction has been crucial." Indeed, many of the respondents thanked me for "for taking fandom seriously," hence demonstrating this positioning is not readily available within media or society.

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## Data set

Data set is available on reasonable request from the author.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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