

Wouldn't You Like to Know?

Reading Queer Theory in Pop TV

By Mitch Kellaway

Introduction: Revisiting *Xena: Warrior Princess*

“Are you two . . . *lovers?*” This question, posed in 2001 in a farcical exposé interview, was directed at the main characters—female fighting duo Xena and Gabrielle—of the long-running action-adventure series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001).¹ Smirking and nudging each other, the pair look back at their inquisitor with “wouldn't you like to know?” plainly written across their faces. Xena, taking a deep breath, embarks upon a long-winded response—“It's like this, technically”—at which point the camera cuts out, leaving the question lingering in the air. While tantalizing in its potential to be definitively, “technically” answered, it has yet to be, despite twelve subsequent years of heated speculation among viewers.² In fact, the striking die-hardness of *Xena's* fandom is testament to how deeply pleasurable reading and contesting queerness is for viewers, and how dearly queer-identified fans esteem complex characters that affirm atypical worldviews.

Xena may now seem like a cultural fossil, ripe for reminiscence but hardly relevant to current conversations. However, the failure to conclusively end the “are they or aren't they?” debate—even if it only remains active amongst “hardcore” fans—hints at how queerness in pop television can be enduringly productive of new or deeper understandings of sexuality and gender. The ongoing scholarly project of understanding how queerness operates in culture can benefit, especially after intervening years of

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development in gender, feminist, queer, and transgender theory, from seeking out those queer “missed moments”³— those texts that, in part due to the sociopolitical climate they were produced in, have been marked as “not quite” or indecipherably gay and subsequently discarded from more mainstream LGB discourse.⁴ However, rather than a charming relic, I contend that *Xena* was ahead of its time in screening an attention-worthy *queerness*, cultivating it over years in characters *essential to the main plot*, and in resisting neat conclusions to “what defines sexuality?” and “what defines gender?”

I believe that deeming *Xena* culturally or academically irrelevant is overly simplistic. Even while its slapstick humor, low-budget costuming, and antiquated special effects visually scream “obsolete” upon first glance, its complex gender politics and unavoidable popularity are reason enough to revisit it. The fact, however, that the show has received relatively little scholarly attention, despite a steadily growing body of work dedicated to lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) pop television,⁵ suggests that it has been overlooked or dismissed. Media scholar Hollis Griffin echoes this in his review of Ron Becker’s study of the rise of gay characters on American network television, *Gay TV, Straight America*. Griffin states:

Becker’s employment of the term ‘gay’ underscores some tensions at the very heart of so many projects invested in gay politics and media. Identifying connotative queerness in the texts of popular culture...[has] been at the heart of many, many projects in media analysis for decades. Becker locates his project as one adjacent to this body of work. . .

He elaborates further:

In many ways, the two theoretical enterprises [of “gay” and “queer” television] frequently arrive at different answers because they essentially raise different questions. In this way, playful textual deconstructions often read more optimistically about the liberatory potential of media for gay people than do more sober analyses of target marketing via representations of sexual difference [such as Becker’s].⁵

I suspect, in line with Griffin’s assertions, that the absence of *Xena* from studies such as Becker’s has something to do, at least in part, with its main characters’ sexual illegibility and the way in which screening such *queerness*—a term I will explore in depth—opens space to question the straightjacket of gender norms and the unquestioned value of being visible about one’s non-heterosexuality in only controlled, socially categorizable ways.

Xena and Gabrielle simply refuse to tidily fit into any specific sexual label or gender role, cued to viewers mostly through visuals and actions—that is, to say, through *performance*. Their refusal to verbally identify or reveal—in other words, to *come out*—

lends their deeply loving relationship a nonchalant resistance that doesn't translate neatly into the familiar gay/straight dichotomy. While their indefinite sexuality worked to attract a wide audience, it doomed them to remain unclaimed by LGB theory—but, thankfully, this is where *queer* theory can step in.

Understanding “Queer”

“Queer” is a difficult concept to pin down. In one popular usage, it functions as a convenient replacement for the more cumbersome “lesbian/gay(/bisexual).”⁶ But such slippage between these binary, either-or identity categories and the amorphous “queer” can cause a great deal of confusion. Queer definitionally *resists* being equated with homosexuality or bisexuality. While the L, the G, and (arguably) the B have been standardized in such a way that their definitions are commonly considered static and denotative,⁶ “queer” is much the opposite. Highly subjective, perpetually contested and redefined, almost inexpressibly theoretical yet deeply personal and idiosyncratic, it inhabits the shadowy realm of the connotative. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, one of the first academics to elaborate on this definition, offers insight:

One of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.⁷

A useful image with which queerness contrasts is one that Becker offers as *the* 1990s mainstream understanding of LGB televisibility: “two dudes kissing.”⁷ This male-centric image, shared by two cisgender (i.e. non-transgender) actors, serves as a standard, though limited, referent for “gay”; “queer,” on the other hand, has no such referent.

Perhaps better conceived of as a presence, quality, aesthetic, or affect, queer is produced and constantly reshaped in that space between the two dudes on the screen and the individual viewer, enmeshed within their own unique perspectives on reality. It doesn't mean the same thing to everyone, nor does it feel or look the same; to those who carry an understanding of what “queer” personally signifies, it may have an “I know it when I see it” resonance—there are no hard and fast rules to methodically map it. For the unpracticed, the first inkling that something is “queer” may be a hint of confusion, double meaning, or a feeling that something is (pleasantly) “off.” It is, as television scholar Lynn Joyrich puts it, “the keen and artful presence of a certain absence...and the accompanying logic of undecidability, incongruity, and allusion.”⁹ Queer is delightfully unscientific, and

varies by context and one's own subject position (i.e. one's worldview as shaped by social identities and historical meanings).

Queerness in a television show can be understood as a quality evoked through a dynamic give-and-take between product and receiver—in other words, its presence relies equally, if not more so, on fan perception than on producers' intentions—and is not dependent on the presence of denoted homosexual characters. “Gay” is, of course, far more palatable and recognizable, for its representation can remain within the familiar realm of the visual and stable. By equating “queer” with “gay,” and then defining “gay” as only that which has been a spectacle (“outed”), queerness is rendered invisible and stripped of its productive nuance.

What's So Unique About *Xena*?

1995 marked the watershed year for gay visibility on American network TV,¹⁰ as well as the first year that *Xena* went into production. The show, which proved an immediate success, resonated with similar sexuality-based issues standardized by the suddenly pervasive, though usually finite or trivial, gay-themed TV storyline,¹¹ but emerged from and evolved in a completely different direction. The show's audience, especially (though not exclusively) the lesbian segment, was able to read the relationship between the two central female characters as “homosexual” without *Xena* or Gabrielle needing to give themselves a specific label. The knowing presence of an identifiable yet undenoted lesbian element, one of the show's hallmarks, is the product of an oblique conversation between *Xena*'s lesbian fans and its producers.¹² Recognizing quickly, via the burgeoning information outlets of the Internet, that the show had struck a chord with a niche it had not explicitly intended to reach, the producers hastened to solidify its fanbase by codifying the lesbian “subtext” as a consistent element of the show.

Xena's inaugural episode, *Sins of the Past* (1995), positions Gabrielle as a naïve village girl who identifies herself as “different” from those around her.¹³ She sees the entrance of *Xena*, a newly reformed warlord just beginning her career as a champion of the defenseless, as a chance to escape the mundane and explore her growing awareness of how to live life outside of prescribed roles. Joining together as a team, the two embark upon a six-year journey of self-discovery and heroism; along the way, they realize they are each other's “soulmates.”¹⁴ Despite the repeated use of this loaded term, accompanied by vows of endless love and devotion, many viewers do not consider *Xena* and Gabrielle to be romantically and/or sexually involved; others believe it's so obvious it goes without saying.

There's a convention in popular television that structures a show's unspoken homosexuality as a secret waiting to be exposed. However, *Xena* breaks with this trend: the unspokenness of its characters' (potential) homosexuality emerges from their comfort with it remaining ambiguous. It's private not because they are ashamed or fear persecution, but because in their world, it just doesn't need to be said aloud or be open to others' judging its validity and acceptability. This structuring logic underpins the Xenaverse's *queerness*—an example of which I will explore in depth below.¹⁵ But first, a question must be addressed.

How Can Popular Culture Be Queer?

There's a tension between a cultural text being both popular culture and queer culture at once—that is, if one understands “pop” as that which appeals to majority demographics (e.g. heterosexual, male, etc.) and “queer” as that which appeals to an alternative subculture. A more specific articulation of this question would then be: how can a text that is widely popular within a culture where heterosexuality is dominant elicit queer ways of seeing and understanding images and relationships? A common answer would argue that a cultural text, if produced cleverly enough, could simultaneously maintain a heterosexual “maintext,” while offering double entendres and coded visuals that comprise an alternate queer “subtext,” readable only to those “in the know.”

However, I draw on Alexander Doty's groundbreaking book, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993), to suggest that hierarchical “texts” of desire are a construct meant to constrain and limit the discomfort of how queerness can actually pervade a text and be part of what makes it so pleasurable for a wide demographic range. According to his theory, seeing queerness in a television show emerges first through unlearning “sub” as its default position.

The queerness I point out in mass culture representation and reading. . . is only “connotative,” and therefore deniable or “insubstantial” as long as we keep thinking within conventional heterocentrist paradigms, which always already have decided that expressions of queerness are *sub*-textual, *sub*-cultural, *alternative* readings, or pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there.¹⁶

To Doty, queerness isn't second-place in a hierarchy of readings, but rather a process that can be actively *entered into* and enhanced by conscious shifts in default assumptions. In other words, an individual who does not identify as queer can perform an act *queerly* or actively *queer* a text, and gain from the experience of seeing outside of ingrained

assumptions. A particularly queer text can invite a reader to do this kind of “thought work,” and even keep it pleasurable.

Further, a viewer may not always have a choice. Queer’s place in the shadows allows it unique productive and suffusive qualities. Doty points out how the “insubstantial” nature of queerness has given it the quality of a “ghost.”¹⁷ Queerness, as specter, haunts those cultural artifacts such as *Xena* that are not explicitly about LGB characters, yet possess the connotation of such forever suspended in limbo around each interaction, perpetually lodged in that moment where it is *just about to be* actualized, but never quite is. It becomes an effect that touches everything, including those situations that are not explicitly romantic/sexual, opening up multiple avenues of interpretation for every instance of body language, conversation, touch, and look. In this way, the specter is hyper-productive rather than merely shrouded, lending the entire text a feeling of charged anticipation. This can have an unnameable, untameable effect on viewers who do not explicitly identify as queer precisely because it doesn’t rely on specific performances of gender or sexuality.

Popular culture, especially that of a playful or fantastical nature like *Xena*, offers a space for the viewer to experience a wider range of (erotic) desire—this childhood-esque “playing pretend” quality is a hallmark of culture that is specifically *pop*, and even more specifically pop culture that is not *high* or *refined*. Film theorist J. Jack Halberstam encapsulates such media in what hir¹⁸ terms “low theory,” which is part of a larger project of defining queerness’ “art of failure” (that is, in this case, a failure to be “taken seriously” and thereby be compelled “to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production”).¹⁹ Hir states:

I want to propose low theory, or theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once, as precisely one [mode] of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve.²⁰

Queer texts, then, do more than explain how a character or relationship should be interpreted: they confuse and challenge the reader, thereby engaging them in several modes of understanding at once. A queer text asks a viewer to be involved in discerning the sources, meanings, and contradictions of their desires.

Moreover, Doty argues that a spectator’s relaxation around pop culture— instantiated through the no-pressure (yet unavoidable) joy of passively looking—can encourage “straight-identified audience members to express a less censored range of desire and pleasure than in everyday life.”²¹ This argument suggests that pop culture

allows audiences considered irreconcilable (e.g. heterosexual and LGB) to potentially approach a common gray-area of desire and pleasure. It is, then, a *commonality* of queer *experience* (which is not always or initially the same as queer identification) that invites *Xena's* strikingly broad demographic range, rather than the creation of a number of limited experiences geared towards separate audiences.

An Exercise in Reading Queerness

My interest in reading queerness in *Xena* stems from the potential released when characters cannot be simply understood as “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual”—moments that, according to Doty, “recognize that texts and people’s responses to them are more sexually transmutable than any one category could signify.”²² I’ve argued that queerness is more than a relationship between two characters of the same gender—it touches how everything can be understood in the show’s universe. It is what might be considered a “logic” within a constructed reality. I’ve explored how this logic can affect audiences who enter the Xenaverse from particular subject positions: non-queer and queer. I’ve argued that a queer text expands the possibilities and understandings of desire for a non-queer subject, albeit in inestimable and idiosyncratic ways—although, even when resisted, its *potential* remains. At the same time, a queer-identified person entering a queer universe may instantly see their own subjectivity—that is, their “way of knowing” that derives from being a queer person in this world—reflected and validated in a way it is not with the majority of pop cultural texts.

So, the work a queer text does is at least two-fold: destabilizing (for normative subjectivities) and mirroring (for non-normative ones); I will also speculate about what queerness *produces* in my conclusion. These processes are inexact and therefore contestable, but I maintain that the Xenaverse evokes queerness through its characters, their relationships, their reactions to new situations, and in the inter-Xenaverse norms that are often less strict or predictable than those in the “real world.” Like many fantasy texts, *Xena* shatters expectations around time, space, and body, and draws on this convention to disrupt more invisible, underlying norms around gender, sexuality, and desire.

Engaging in a conscious practice of reading queerness can make these theoretical concepts clearer. Recalling Doty, it is essential to this exercise that we resist a default understanding of heterosexual attraction as a “maintext” and homosexual attraction as a “subtext”; there is no need to assign value and it is possible that both exist at once. To that end, I’ve selected a useful *Xena* episode to read: Season Four finale *Deja Vu All Over*

Again (1999).²² Set in the modern day, we encounter the current spiritual reincarnations of Xena, Gabrielle, and Joxer, a wanna-be, bumbling male warrior. The three are supernaturally drawn together by the impending doom of Y2K; together, they begin unexpectedly experiencing flashbacks of their previous lives as the ancient heroes—the only heroes capable, once they tap into their true identities, of defending the earth from apocalypse. Everything is “off,” but their familiar faces prime us, as viewers, to filter our understanding of their relationships and motives through their embodied histories. In other words, we assume the Xena-looking character (“Annie”) *is* Xena, and so on and so forth.

However, things are not what they seem. From the beginning we are alerted that this universe is decentered: it is set in an unfamiliar atmosphere (*i.e.* recognizably the present day, though a wonky version of it) and it quickly becomes apparent that each character’s gender is not necessarily congruent with the reincarnated spirit they possess. While the modern Mattie, who is portrayed by the same actress who plays Gabrielle, is truly the reincarnation of her ancient look-alike, the episode’s major conflict is that modern-day Xena look-alike Annie finds that she is, much to her horror, *not* the reincarnation of the warrior princess, but actually the embodiment of the laughable Joxer. On the other hand, Joxer look-alike Harry finds that he is actually the modern reincarnation of Xena.

A Playful Dissonance

Deja Vu playfully skews gender boundaries and creates an incredible amount of sexual dissonance as characters attempt to figure out how they should now express themselves and to whom they “should” be attracted based upon the sudden awareness of their inherited identities. Interestingly, with the visual cues skewed, viewers are forced to go through a parallel questioning process as they adjust their desires to the new situation. While Harry’s body outwardly signifies the sexual unattractiveness of the child-like “fool” Joxer, he now internally possesses and begins to perform the sexually seductive presence of Xena via shifts in mannerisms, voice, and sexual object choice. At the same moment, Annie begins to perform the customary unattractive buffoonery of Joxer.

To confuse matters more, Joxer (Annie) and Xena (Harry) are initially attracted to each other; however, once they discover the true nature of their identities, Xena begins to immediately desire Gabrielle, while Joxer quite unexpectedly expresses a fleeting homosexual attraction to Xena’s former lover Ares. Interestingly, both “couples” outwardly signify as heterosexual because of their bodies’ sex, despite the ideological

understanding that their internal gender identities mark them both as “gay.” The episode concludes with a passionate kiss between Xena (in Harry’s body) and Gabrielle—a physical expression of desire that is never portrayed so graphically while they are in their original same-sexed bodies.

Deja Vu is a visual text rife with queer promise. The plot remains predictable (Xena saves the world from destruction. . . again!), providing a static backdrop for fascinating gender play. Its off-putting costuming and sets, its jarring place within the arc of the entire series (right after an emotional episode in which the protagonists are crucified and ascend to heaven), and its kaleidoscopic coupling of not-quite-recognizable versions of beloved characters generate a simultaneous attraction and unpalatability. It ensnares the viewer in a disruptive viewing mode where they are unable to sustain an uncomplicated gaze on a familiar object of desire. The final product is equal parts subversive, uncomfortable, and goofy; its joking references to itself call out the presence of the audience, inviting viewers to position themselves in relation to the storyline. *How does this affect their reading and desire for particular characters? Should they dismiss its effects? Enjoy the ride? Embrace it with a “cult” fervor? Once the question is settled, does the next paradigm shift create a need to reassess? Does it become so convoluted that one can throw out their allegiances to a character’s gender expression, biological sex, or embodiment?*

In the end, understanding the dynamics between Harry, Annie, and Mattie’s as “heterosexual” barely begins to capture their nuances. At the same time, a “homosexual” or “bisexual” reading falls short. Any attempt to keep these two “texts” separate proves insubstantial, because it ultimately requires an understanding of both at once. A hierarchy between “maintext” and “subtext” is effectively undermined in the face of the identity scramble; texts interweave as each actor plays multiple characters at once. A reading of Harry, then, is impoverished by simply understanding him as either himself, Joxer, or Xena. Rather, a viewer must understand him as all three people inhabiting the same body, space, and time—and keep in mind the often contradictory gender and sexuality-based meanings attendant with this tripartite identity. The full significance of the episode’s comedic thrust is accomplished only through an understanding of the concurrent ironies of a Joxer-bodied person (Harry) being initially attractive to a Xena-bodied person (Annie), of him becoming sexually attractive to a Gabrielle-bodied person (Mattie), his embodiment of “Xena” via campy performative cues (e.g. sensual voice, fighting prowess, etc.), of a Joxer-identified Xena-bodied person (Annie) being at once

hetero/homosexually attracted to the male (Ares) whose desire for Xena is constantly thwarted by her own (homosexual) love for Gabrielle. And the list goes on.

What Does Queerness Do?

I read *Deja Vu* as a riff on being compelled to figure out one's "correct" mate based on one's given gender. And, amidst all of that frivolity, I imagine the episode caught some viewers unaware with its sudden illumination of the assumptions brought to sexual attraction. Insofar that television, at least in part, is a way for viewers to imagine their world remade, the presence of queer approaches to gender, sexuality, and desire have the capacity to affirm or expand a viewer's suspicions that *their* world does not quite fit into the neat boxes society has handed them. But elaboration depends on the individual—"queering" one's approach to objects, texts, ideologies, relations, and behavior is a personal choice to actively engage with one's capacity to see structures non-normatively. Recognizing oneself in a queer text—whether fleeting or sustained—does not demand any *specific acts* of its interpreter. But it does elicit a response, whether personal or political, internalized or performed.

I can often spot queerness afoot not when it is named, but when it generates a fury in viewers who seek the tangible, inspiring fruitless grasps at precise language and finality. Because queerness is, to quote contemporary queer writer Nayla Ziadeh, "not something that ever stays still; [but something] transient and, in that sense, in a constant state of becoming,"²⁴ it stymies attempts to point at a real-world effect and declare, "this is what queerness *did*," "*this* is definitely queer, and would always be regardless of context or actor," or "this is what identifying with queerness *obligates someone to do*." This can lead to the conclusion that queerness is a theory that does not translate to real-world change, and even something that can detract from practical work that expands the boundaries of normativity (for instance, the gay and lesbian rights movement). I take a post-series finale review written by lesbian writer Robin Silverman as a prime example of this stance.

In "What *Xena* Giveth, *Xena* Taketh Away," Silverman condemns the show for "ruthlessly" exploiting lesbian desire, setting lesbian viewers up to see themselves reflected in what was, at the time, one of the world's most popular television shows, only to have their heroines never form a stable, openly acknowledged relationship.²⁵ She finds the show disingenuous because it hints at acceptance of same-sex love but avoids committing to "social change," which would only be made possible by a public and unwavering recognition that Xena and Gabrielle are in love. She concludes that denying

the characters a sexual label represents another example of popular media's practice of punishing women for renouncing heterosexuality.²⁶ Screening non-normative sexuality, should it have any positive real-world effects, is therefore obligated to align with a specific visibility tactic of the gay rights movement: coming out.

Significantly, however, Silverman spends the first half of her review musing about how *Xena's* lesbian element extends beyond an attempt to boost ratings by titillating heterosexual men. She claims that, consciously and unconsciously, the portrayals of Xena (Lucy Lawless) and "sidekick" Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) create a desirability that is unexpected and ineffable:

Lawless riveted a wide range of viewers precisely by blurring previously well-demarcated gender boundaries, and making mincemeat of stereotypical sex roles. The sidekick idea turned out to be lucrative, but not only for the guys who are into "lesbian" porn. These actors are genuinely sexy together, in a way that was immediately recognizable to lesbians and intriguing to other viewers.²⁷

Moreover, as a mother watching with her eight-year-old son, Silverman relates a growing realization that the "unlikely bedfellows" comprising *Xena's* diverse audience are not, as she had originally assumed, an indicator that "each took our discrete pleasure from what we were viewing." Rather, she finds, after both herself and her son become equally invested in the romantic relationship between Xena and Gabrielle, that the show's "heterogeneous audience shared a common pleasure in *Xena*." This pleasure is not found in lesbian sex, but tied to it somehow; it's not in lesbian romance, but it can come through in those moments; and it's not in characters identifying as lesbian, but it resonates with living as a non-heterosexual in a heteronormative society. It's confusing, it's affirming, it's jarring, it's gratifying, it's unpinnable, it's magnetic: it's *queerness*.

In Silverman's analysis, I hear a telling ambivalence of this effect, though she never identifies it as "queer": non-reliance on traditional binaries (male/female, gay/straight, out/closeted) resonates with LGB viewers, even as it interrogates the practice of limiting desire or identity, be it through dichotomous labels or, to draw on a timely example, through convention (for instance, engaging in marriage).²⁸ The limit of her analysis lies in only being able to see *Xena* as affirming for non-heterosexuals if the character clearly states that she is not heterosexual. However, there are plenty of lesbians and bisexual people who do not feel reflected in the mainstream gay rights movement or who see drawing attention to their sexuality unnecessary for a variety of reasons; moreover, Silverman's default assumption that Xena is straight-until-proven-gay perpetuates the norms that queerness destabilizes.

Other reviews allude to this tension. For example, Heather Findlay's "8 Reasons to Canonize *Xena*," appearing post-finale in lesbian magazine *Girlfriends*, encourages viewers, through a comparison to Ellen DeGeneres' concurrent sitcom *Ellen* (1994-1998) to celebrate *Xena's* distinctly non-conformist bent:

Ellen was a perfect rallying point for an assimilationist gay movement: its heroine was a middle-class blond bookstore manager with a mortgage and no sex life. In contrast, *Xena* is a leather-clad, raven-haired Myrmidon with a trusty steed and a shapely girlfriend. As a result, you won't see the suits at GLAAD [Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders] giving awards to *XWP*.²⁹

Xena's irreconcilability with politics that seek equality through a "we're just as normal as everyone else" logic—at least, that is, the vocal segment referred to above as "assimilationist"—leads Findlay to claim *Xena* as a "defender of the dyke underclass." *Xena* and Gabrielle may not be "poster girls," she continues, "but they're true-blue and blue collar."

The heroines' ambiguous sexuality, then, marks them as non-representative of what a "lesbian" can be to the outside world because it implicitly threatens the lines between the boxes that both heterosexual and gay people hold dear. Findlay finds that screening queerness validates those at the intersections of social "othering": women marked by both a marginalized sexuality and marginalized socioeconomic status. There is something in the messiness of a sexuality that falls outside demarcated boxes that can feel very *real* to lived experiences ("true-blue"), and there is something in *Xena's* failure to be claimed by LGB history that aligns it with underrepresented minorities ("blue collar"). In other words: a fabricated mythological heroine can somehow feel more down-to-earth than screening a lesbian "model minority."

Conclusion: What Can Queerness Inspire?

This validating effect leads me to speculate: can queerness be thought of as a generative force that spurs the creation of new realities and possibilities? How can the act of reading queerness produce something meaningful and enduring for the viewer? As media scholar Kevin G. Barnhurst argues in the introduction to *Media/Queered: Visibility and its Discontents*, bringing queerness into the realm of the visible can be complex and contradictory, though fruitful. He explains:

Signaling the existence of queer persons may aim for inclusion in public discourse, but, through simultaneous contrast, the assertion contains its inevitable opposite: Queers are different and cannot go unremarked.³⁰

This is the crux of queerness' productivity: it begs to be "remarked" upon, yet insists this be done outside the norms of public discourse. Queerness spurs new language and elaboration—artistic, academic, or otherwise—to describe it.

I can begin the work of mapping—work which extends indefinitely beyond the means of this paper—by offering one example of queerness' effects emerging between *Xena* fans: the creation of communal language, which is itself an aspect of the larger project of maintaining an online "Xenaverse." Tellingly, slippage exists between the two common uses of the word "Xenaverse": one refers to the show's internal world, and the other refers to the constellation of fan-generated sites, forums, fiction, and music videos available online.³¹ Rather than indicating a delusion that both are the same, I understand this as a reference to the way in which *Xena's* story and characters invite fan ownership and elaboration. As Sarah Gwenllian-Jones' essay "Histories, Fictions, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*" argues, in an illustrative quote culled by media scholar Julia Levin Russo:

the online Xenaverse. . . demonstrates that the interpretive practices of fans are not focused only on the world of the television text but also on the 'text of the world'. . . [and] it may be that our existing concept of a television 'fan culture' is inadequate to the task of addressing some of the more ambitious and urgently political projects in which fans are engaged.³²

In relations between *Xena* fans I see practices inspired by the world of the text which, in turn, holds potential to shape the text of their own worlds: namely, members of the online Xenaverse often put aside whatever social identity they carry—whether lesbian, straight, bisexual, gay, pansexual, etc.—when discussing the show. Instead, fans engage in a practice of claiming loyalty to specific character pairings: self-identified "subtexters" (or "subbers") argue that *Xena* and Gabrielle are the so-called OTP ("one true pairing")³³ while "maintexters" (or "shippers," short for "relationshipippers") aver that Ares God of War is *Xena's* destined mate.³⁴ Aside from these main factions, a space—often a literal space on a messageboard—is set aside for "bitexters" (or "multitexters"): those who do not identify any one of *Xena's* relationships as primary, who believe that *Xena* is equally meant to be with multiple people, or who consider other relationships that do not include *Xena* to be the show's focal point.³⁵

While the "subber" camp is often dominated by lesbian and bisexual viewers, there are quite a few heterosexual adherents. These fans either go unremarked or celebrated, rather than shamed, for abandoning the sexual preference of their real-world selves; the same can be said of lesbian and bisexual viewers as "shippers." While one's avowed sexual orientation often influences one's approach to *Xena's* relationships, it does

not ultimately guarantee what pairing attracts a viewer. *Xena* somehow encourages fans to develop new identity labels, consider non-monogamy a part of a complex relationship dynamic, veer into discussing partnership on a genderless “soulmate” plane, acknowledge that screened relationships are both a text they’re engaging with and something that makes real demands on their capacity for emotional response, and switch their analysis of *Xena*’s object choice from one based on gender (she’s straight vs. she’s gay) to one based on individuals (she loves Gabrielle vs. she loves Ares).

Xena’s fans engage in what I find a distinctly *queer* dialogue because binaries and labels are simply inadequate to describe the reality before them. While such insight does not guarantee they will take this practice and apply it elsewhere, it also does not mean that, because this practice is tied to a constructed fantasy world, it cannot affect their approach to the next text they analyze or interaction they enter. Queerness opens new spaces of possibility and inspires creativity where inherited ways of knowing fall short; each queer act and queer reading opens that much more space for the next queer act or reading and chips away at the dominance of binaried logics. As Halberstam suggests, reading texts that fail to conform to comfortable or inherited understandings allows for “visionary insights” and “flights of fancy.”³⁶ For *Xena* fans today, the fact that the question “wouldn’t you like to know?” will go forever unanswered does not lead them to abandon the text or agree to disagree. Rather, it opens a door for viewers to endlessly elaborate sexuality’s meanings, in conversation with themselves and with others.

Endnotes

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Afsaneh Najmabadi of Harvard University’s department for Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality for helping me develop an earlier draft of this paper.

1. John Laing (director), “You Are There,” *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2004). First aired in 2001.
2. For example of ongoing fan debate, see two currently active fan forums: *Xena Online Community* and *Talking Xena*:
 - *Talking Xena*, <<http://talkingxena.yuku.com/>>, accessed 30 October 2013.
 - *Xena Online Community*, <<http://xena.yuku.com/>>, accessed 30 October 2013.
3. I’ve borrowed the concept of “missed moments” from:
 - Maria San Filippo, *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2013), 15.

4. For my understanding of the interaction between LGB televisibility and the 1990's American sociopolitical climate, I've referred to:

- Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

Becker's study usefully presents aspects of "straight America" that fueled the meteoric rise of specific kinds of LGB characters and storylines, including: the Clinton administration's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, growing multicultural discourse, television's marketing witch from broadcasting to "narrow-casting," the emergence of the Internet, and the rise of "yuppie" (young [liberal] urban professionals) as the target network television audience. I find Becker's approach equally significant for its thoroughness as for what it structurally overlooks. As he tallies the appearances of LGB characters, it appears that the most crucial element for identifying if someone "counts" is whether or not they have "come out" as gay, lesbian, or bisexual—rather than, for instance, if LGB fans relate to or see themselves in a character.

Becker's approach mirrors the way most LGB characters were presented on network (rather than cable) television at the time. Rather than a character's desires being a seamless part of their complex existence—only one of endless axes of identification that dynamically interact—the LGB character had to make a spectacle of themselves in order to be rendered coherent. Once a publicly denoted homosexual/bisexual, this aspect of a character could not simply fade into the the grander tapestry of their existence; rather, it became the focal point of their purpose, a foil for revealing aspects of the more important heterosexual characters, or simply the butt of the joke.

In Becker's mirroring, I also see a reproduction of the limiting norms of how one should decide which characters to discuss when analyzing LGB television. Yet, if focus is turned from the intents of television marketers to a show's viewers, the criteria and results may be less methodical and neatly conclusive, but capture texts that are vital to the conversation. For instance, *Xena* stands as a significant early influence on current understandings of lesbian fan reception and practice. See:

- Julia Levin Russo, *Indiscrete Media: Television/Digital Convergence and Economies of Online Lesbian Fan Communities* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2010), Dissertation, 1-15.

5. For examples of contemporary studies of LGB and queer (often used as a synonym for "LGB," as opposed to the "queer" this paper elaborates on) that make passing or no reference to *Xena*, see Becker and:

- Rebecca Beirne (ed.), *Televising Queer Women: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008).
- Jane Campbell and Theresa Carilli (eds), *Queer Media Images: LGBT Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2013).
- Samuel A. Chambers (ed.), *The Queer Politics of Television* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009).
- Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen (eds.), *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013).
- Larry Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press 2001).
- James R. Keller (ed.), *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming* (Jefferson, NC: MarcFarland Publishing 2005).
- Thomas Peele (ed.), *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

- Stephen Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (New York: Applause Theater & Cinema Books 2002).
5. Hollis Griffin, *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (No. 50, Spring 2008), <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/gayTV/index.html>>, accessed 30 October 2013.
 6. Though often “T,” which stands for “transgender,” is added to “LGB,” I purposefully do not do so when specifically talking about sexuality, as “transgender” refers not to a sexual orientation but to gender identity. I place “bisexual” in parentheses here because of its resonance with the “L” and “G” as a sexual orientation. Yet, the B has its own fraught history to being represented accurately alongside homosexuality, and is not neatly encapsulated by the terms I’ve used (“binary” and “either-or”). For more on this see:
 - Shiri Eisner, *Bi: Notes for a Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press 2013).
 7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
 8. Becker, 2.
 9. Lynn Joyrich. “Epistemology of the Console,” *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* (New York: Routledge 2009), 30.
 10. Becker, 158.
 11. According to Becker’s *Gay TV and Straight America*, which charts the rise of gay and lesbian characters in American television, storylines featuring gay characters were coded by mid-1990s marketers as “hip,” cutting edge, and even in-demand for their appeal to young, liberal audiences (pg. 5). Predictable, finite, and usually among minor characters, these storylines also worked to provide “straight America” with tangible evidence of its own self-assured political correctness without shaking the foundation of heteronormativity—as Becker puts it, “to acknowledge homophobic presence but refuse to do anything about it.” (p. 55)
 12. Robin Silverman, ““What Xena Giveth, Xena Taketh Away,”” *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* (Boston: Oct. 31, 2001), Vol. 8 No. 5, <[http://www.thefreelibrary.com/What Xena Giveth, Xena Taketh Away.-a078360857](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/What+Xena+Giveth,+Xena+Taketh+Away.-a078360857)>, accessed 30 October 2013.
 13. Doug Lefler (director), “Sins of the Past.” *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2004). First aired in 1995.
 14. From midway through Season 4 through to the end of the series, Xena and Gabrielle mutually refer to each other as “soulmates.” Examples:
 - Rick Jacobson (director), “Between the Lines.” *Xena: Warrior Princess*, (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2004). First aired in 1998.
 - Rick Jacobson (director), “The Ring.” *Xena: Warrior Princess*, (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2005). First aired in 1999.

The rhetoric of the “soulmate” conveniently resonates with the fan identificatory practices discussed in this paper’s conclusion. “Soulmate” seems to imply that true love exists between Xena and one other person/deity, essentially decided on a genderless spiritual plane. The fan belief that Xena is “meant to be” with only one individual is undeterred by the fact that she, Gabrielle, and Ares all engage in limited trysts with other characters—acts that only strengthens a conviction of monogamous love in their implicit emphasis on the inadequacy of other pairings.

15. As noted in the conclusion of this paper, “Xenaverse” is alternately referred to by viewers as both the internal universe of the show, as well as the online presences of fans websites, forums, fan fiction, and music videos.

16. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), *xii*.

17. Ibid.

18. “Hir” is a gender-neutral pronoun, as opposed to “she” or “he.” Halberstam is publicly between genders so, rather than choose a gendered pronoun for hir, I have chosen to use a neutral one.

- J. Halberstam, “On Pronouns (3 September 2012), <<http://www.jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/>>, accessed 30 October 2013.

19. J. Halberstam, “Introduction: Low Theory,” *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

20. Ibid., 15.

21. Doty, 4.

22. Ibid.

23. Renee O’Connor (director), “Deja Vu All Over Again,” *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2004). First aired in 1999.

24. Nayla Ziadeh, “Queer is the Question,” *The New Statesman* (8 September 2013) <<http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2013/09/queer-question>>, accessed 30 October 2013.

25. Silverman.

26. For example, see:

- Larry Gross, “Show Me a Happy Homosexual and I’ll Show You a Gay Corpse,” *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press 2001), 60-80.

This trope has also been followed by various online popular media watchdogs. Examples include:

- Sara Warn, “Silvia Dies on Her Wedding Day on *Los Hombres de Paco*,” *AfterEllen.com* (16 July 2009), <<http://www.afterellen.com/silvia-dies-on-her-wedding-day-on-los-hombres-de-paco/07/2009/>>, accessed 30 October 2013.
- “Bury Your Gays,” *TV Tropes.org*, <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>>, accessed 30 October 2013.

27. Silverman.

28. For a queer critique of marriage, see: J. Halberstam, “Gaga Relations: The End of Marriage,” *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 97-130.

29. Heather Findlay, “8 Reasons to Canonize *Xena: Warrior Princess*,” *Girlfriends* (1 May 2001).

30. Kevin G. Barnhurst, "Visibility as Paradox: Representation and Simultaneous Contrast," *Media/Queered: Visibility and Its Discontents* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 1.
31. I myself have been a queer fan, and was actively engaged in the online Xenaverse on-and-off throughout my early twenties. It is from these experiences that I first became intrigued about the blurry boundaries of the "Xenaverse" and ways in which fans engage in debate over Xena's sexuality.
32. I would like to acknowledge *Xena* fans (referred to here with their online handles) Silverlight1, SaraXenite, and Faith102 for their helpful conversation, which has enabled me to clarify my thoughts concerning the definitions of "subtext" and "maintext" in fan discourse.
33. As fandom language was originally developed online in chatrooms and forums, that is often where its best definitions remain. For a definition of "OTP" see:
- "Main/One True Pairing," *TVTropes.org*, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/OneTruePairing>, accessed 30 October 2013.
34. Sarah Gwenllian-Jones, "Histories, Fictions, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*," *Television & New Media* (November 2000), 403-418, as quoted in Julia Levin Russo's *Indiscrete Media*.
35. The terms "bitexter" and "multitexter" are derived from observing *Xena Online Community* and *Talking Xena* (see endnote 2). It is, however, useful to note that these terms are not nearly as codified within online fandom as "subtexter" and "shipper." They were chosen, instead of other possible terms, for use in this paper for their semantic similarity to "subtext" and "maintext." Another common term is "fence-sitter" (*Talking Xena*). A further inquiry into the diversity of "text" self-identification reveals a humorous, self-reflexive fan practice of labeling any sort of love in the show with a text-based moniker. For example, love between Xena and her horse is at times labeled "horsetext."
36. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6.

