Queering Wake Work: Mediating Anti-Black and Anti-Queer Sentiment Through Tumblr Archives

by

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Preface

The first beginning

This thesis project began as a question regarding identity formation by young queer people of color particularly in non-urban areas. This was inspired by my own attempt to let my own imagination lead me out of my hometown, which had been the source of a lot of trauma. In fact, my decision to come to the northeast was inspired largely by the association of North with liberal, liberal with “LGBT friendly” and “LGBT friendly” with happiness. Obviously, this move was not all that I expected it to be for a lot of different reasons. I also understand the problematic nature of my dreams now—believing that LGBT people have a right to in live certain places and can use them as stomping ground without respect to those who already live there is colonial. Still, I was curious about the stories of other young people like myself who came to understand their identities through how they imagined their life somewhere else.

I began looking for examples of this on the internet because theoretically, I thought, everyone has access to the internet regardless of where they live or who they are. This is where I first came across the topic of my second chapter—tribute posts created for trans youth of color. It also influenced my first chapter about the Steven Universe fandom because of the conflicts that happened in regards to whitewashing the fandom. As time went on, I identified tumblr as the main site of my research. Because of norms that encourage disconnection in “real life” (discussed further in chapter 1) tumblr offered a site where particularly vulnerable connections could be made.
I presented on my research from the *Steven Universe* chapter at the end of my summer program which revealed many contradictions in the counterarchival model I have been using as an analytic. Over the course of that project, I interrogated why I wanted to focus on queer youth of color from non-urban areas. I still think the particular experiences of this demographic is important, but with such a broad but also specific topic, I realized that there were more differences between individual non-urban youth than between the categories non-urban and urban youth.

Methodologically, writing about queer youth of color originally from non-urban areas on the internet proved to be problematic, and not only because there are so few stories available. Rather, it was an issue because I was thinking about identity in an additive way. Mary Pat Brady criticizes this manner of thinking about identity in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, calling it a “scaffold imagery” presumably referring to the way scaffolds neatly bind together poles in a predictable fashion. Identity isn’t like that at all. Instead, because of a lack of universal experience, it is not confinable in that way. I knew this from my journey and when my own identity failed attempts to fit any molds—much to the contempt of people who were invested in easily packageable identities.

In working through the complexities of identity and queerness, I began to focus less on identities, and more on the figures around which young queer people congregated. Thinking about “queer” as an orientation to power instead of an identity

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factor began to allow me to theorize more complex power dynamics and brought me to a new understanding of my project: *Queering Wake Work: Mediating Anti-Queer and Trans Sentiment Through Tumblr Archives*.

**The Second Beginning**

I took refuge in books for most of my childhood, so it made sense that I’d chosen to go to a bookstore to get my mind off of my latest identity crisis. It was April of my sophomore year. My *Latinidad* class had, unintentionally, forced me to question my relationship to my blackness and engage with my internalized oppression and peculiar lived experience. It was exhausting to try to explain my proximity to and investment in Latinidad (resulting from my close friendships with mostly Latina women) and near-phobia of my blackness. These challenges paired with other overly-dramatic life events, and I felt the urge to leave campus.

I knew the Metro North as an escape because of many dozens of visits to the train station, dropping off and picking up Wesleyan students for money. I liked to think that I was a key player in facilitating their own flight from campus, and now it was my turn. Some three hours and a 6 train mishap later, I was there. This was my first time at Bluestockings and I was in awe of the many beautiful books lining the shelves. I happened upon the anthology *Strange Affinities* on the “race” shelf and immediately purchased it. The first page of the introduction expressed that the limits of “identity-based forms of collectivity” necessitated “alternative modes of coalition
beyond prior models of racial or ethnic solidarity.” ² For me, this opened up the possibility for the identity that the world saw and my lived experience to coexist peacefully without needing constant justification.

I wasn’t convinced that I completely understood the concepts discussed in the introduction and the brilliantly curated essays that followed, but the idea of challenging the assumption of common experience along racial lines was extremely relieving for me. Later, on the Metro North ride back to New Haven, I was beginning to fall in love with the framework that would drive my research.

Oddly enough, it was my fraught relationship with blackness and struggle with my mental health—things that I assumed would make me wholly unqualified to do research—that eventually brought me to think through identification in more nuanced ways. Since that fateful day, I’ve developed healthier, albeit less audacious, methods of working through my identity struggles and mental illness. I still return to Bluestockings every once and a while for nostalgia’s sake and profess my love for the Metro North for starting me off on this queer journey.

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Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.

--José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*  

**Introduction: Toward Queer Formulations of the Archive**

How do queer and trans people imagine worlds without transphobia, homophobia and other kinds of violence against people like themselves while engaging with the fact that those oppressions are endemic to their lives? This question drove my thesis in its beginning stages and was informed by my own imaginative journey out of a stifling southern suburb in hopes of a queer-friendly future. I was curious to see if other young people had similar experiences dreaming their way out of environments where they didn’t see people like themselves represented in a positive way. I looked to the Internet because it can, theoretically, be accessed by anyone and used as a means of “self-fashioning” and exercising “personal autonomy” in spite of unfriendly or absent queer imagery.  

On the compilation blogging site Tumblr, I found evidence of new futures depicted in tribute posts to young trans

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people and communities that formed around queer readings of a children’s TV show. They took many forms including artwork, written posts, selfies and more.

The first of these archives comes in the form of online tribute posts to young queer people who have died of suicide. These posts use illustration and recirculation to create online presences for these young trans people that ideally represent how they would have liked to be seen, even as there is so much negative representation of their lives. The second archive is comprised of the conversations about the reportedly queer and racialized characters of *Steven Universe* and why they must be defended from appropriation by white fans. This site of analysis queers the official plotline, allowing racialized subjects to claim the characters for themselves. I conceptualize these archives as queer in the sense that they run counter to hegemonic archives—hegemonic archives being those which are validated by the state, privilege the spectacular over the mundane, and emphasize physical evidence with often limited access to the public.

Both of my two sites of analysis are also queer because they strive toward a better future without anti-queer violence. On the world-making potential of “queer” and “crip” languages, Robert McRuer writes that they “imagine, and help to construct, a world apart from the intertwined homophobia and ableism that structure the world we currently inhabit.” I agree with McRuer’s analysis of the world-

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making potential of queer while also recognizing that those creating these archives turn to the same conventions used in hegemonic narratives in order to be legible (i.e. notions of authenticity, gendered and racialized tropes and visibility). By relying on these techniques and reaching toward, but not quite creating, new worlds in new terms, my sites of analysis gestured toward queerness even if they don’t quite reach it. My sites of analysis thus expose the limits of counterarchives because they still must rely on hegemonic archival languages and thus never completely counter the normative.

With this problematic in mind, I open this thesis with the ways in which “queer” failed, or perhaps language failed “queer,” so that they might become points from which new conversations may stem. In doing so, I am not trying to dismiss the work that I believe that these archives are trying to do; rather, I start to frame my two sites of analysis as archives that were queer in the sense that they exist in opposition to the “official archive” that encourages progressive memorialization. As I thought through these sites and their relationship to the official archives, I came to see that my archives were striving toward queerness and not quite reaching it.

When I use “queer,” I invoke its history as a reclaimed slur dating back to AIDS activism. In this way, queer is an orientation that is not only about sexuality or gender, but the ways in which sexuality, gender, class, race, and other axis of difference interact to shape power dynamics and provide grounds for coalition

building. I don’t conflate it with LGBT even though they are often used as synonymous, including by the queer young people online. Though my research engages with people whose identities may fall under the LGBT umbrella, their LGBT identity is not why I consider my work “queer studies.” In fact, at times, I’m not necessarily talking about queer people at all, but rather what I understand to be queer ways of relating to hegemonic power structures.

This question of power relations became one of central problems as I considered what made these sites queer. What does it mean if an archive is queer in the sense that it is community-created and ill-preserved but it is also invested in becoming more “official?” Or, what if the archive has to rely on conventions of the past even as it queers the future? After trying to no avail to distinguish explicitly between the archives I’m studying and their “official” counterparts, I realized that the archives I’m studying, interventions into the plot of an animated TV show and digital tributes, were, in this sense, both queer and normative. With restraints in form and language, I found that it was nearly impossible for the archives I’m studying to be completely divorced from hegemonic archival logics. Still, they attempted to imagine new futures for queer people while mediating anti-queer and trans as well as racist sentiment.

Archives, Temporality and Wake Work

Archives are often very unfriendly to queer people. micah cárdenas expresses the ways in which the archive can become a site of repeated trauma, particularly on social media sites like Facebook where content about queer violence is shared with
abandon. 7 This is especially so for queer people of color who may scroll past videos or stories about queer women of color being brutalized. Echoing cárdenas’ sentiment, I draw upon scholars such as Saidiya Hartman to acknowledge the archive’s use as a tool of erasure and continued violence against marginalized people. 8 Knowing that the violence of the archive isn’t just confined to the past, I also draw upon Christina Sharpe’s idea of “wake work” to think through what it means for queer and trans people to use “literature, performance and visual culture to mediate [black] un/survival.” 9 The archives I discuss may not overcome queer violence and antiblackness, but they still do the important work of opposing it.

Within queer studies, there has been a scholarly trend parallel to Sharpe’s “wake work” called the backward turn. Heather Love articulates “feeling backward” to be a “disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection…” that is informed by the “queer historical experience of failed or impossible love.” 10 The backward turn, like wake work, encourages subjects to engage with rather than scorn “bad feelings.” I believe that bringing wake work and the backward turn together—in the tradition of queer of color critique—can offer a way to better understand how anti-blackness and anti-queerness overlap to shape queer of color subjectivity.

My intention here is not to compare separate racialized and gendered modes of analysis—I recognize that racial regimes of power are inseparable, though distinct, from those of gender and sexuality.¹¹ This means that the violence faced by queer people of color today is imbricated in a longer history of gendered and racial oppression. This understanding of subjectivity is informed by queer of color analysis, which underlies my own analysis. Ferguson and Hong in Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization understand queer of color critique to be, “not a multiculturalist celebration, not an excuse for presuming a commonality among all radicalized peoples, but a clear-eyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within as well as across racial groupings.”¹²

Just as Hong and Ferguson are especially careful not to homogenize the experience of any one group while still realizing the particularities of experience, I also want to recognize that Sharpe’s original formulation of wake work is shaped particularly by anti-blackness. My project largely engages with black death and representation but also crosses over many other racial and ethnic lines, making Sharpe’s formulation of wake work salient but not universal. That being said, I want to think about the other kinds of wakes we find ourselves in, namely those of anti-queer and anti-trans sentiment, and how all of these intersect with each other while remaining distinct. Therefore, I want to clarify that my usage of wake work expands upon Sharpe’s formulation by acknowledging the particularity of living in the wake

¹² Ferguson, 17.
of anti-blackness by also viewing anti-queer and anti-trans sentiment as wakes in and of themselves.

Wake work, in both my formulation and Sharpe’s, is queer because it refuses the idea that grief should be overcome; or, as Sharpe puts it, wake work “troubles mourning.” 13 Similarly, the backward turn in queer studies rejects progress narratives and chooses to sit with tragedies in queer history. Both wake work and “feeling backward” recognize the ways in which non-linear temporality shapes black and queer lives respectively. 14 15 Scholars contributing to these contestations of mourning allow confrontations with queer and racialized violence to take a variety of forms, including through art. My intervention then comes where Sharpe and Cvetkovich leave space for tribute posts and identifications with figures of anti-queer and racialized pasts and their overlaps with the present. These archives of the present refuse to “get over it” and instead allow queers of color to sit with horrors that many consider to be past.

(Queer) Counterarchives

I conceptualize my two research topics as archives because the particular forms of social media that they are hosted on act as repositories for histories—even if they have historically been considered unimportant. To center these historically marginalized sources, I extend my counter-formulation of the archive, and by doing so, I aim to queer it. The archive as an analytic has facilitated my understanding of

13 Sharpe, 19.
14 Love, 3.
15 Sharpe, 22.
the wake work sites like Tumblr enable by structuring my thinking in a temporal manner. However, the analytic comes with some important constraints.

I encountered these sites via archival research not in real time, as a digital ethnographer like Tom Boellstorff might. 16 This means that I am not able to know the motives of the people whose cultural production I am studying. While this doesn’t necessarily inhibit my argument, which is about the queer worldmaking possibilities that these archives open up, it does limit the conclusions I can draw from the archives.

Additionally, I am attentive to what black studies scholars call the “violence of the archive.” 17 Hartman, along with Sharpe and others, theorize what it means to tell impossible histories with only colonial artifacts. 18 I acknowledge that the forms of violence the colonial archive can perpetuate is different from the current moment since more people have the ability to curate their lives, often through online media. However, I also look to these scholars because they illuminate the continuities between today’s official archives and archives of American chattel slavery. The colonial archive enacted violence upon black Africans through slave ledgers, depicting them as numbers or exaggerating anatomical differences to prove inferiority. 19 Today, official (and unofficial) archives of the present can harm queer people through misgendering, misnaming, falsifying, misrepresenting and recreating violent images. By this, I mean to say that the tools of misrepresentation used by

16 See Coming of Age in Second Life.
17 Hartman, 1.
18 Sharpe, 2.
colonizers and slave masters share commonalities with those used today and anti-black and anti-queer regimes of race and gender persist to the present.

This understanding of co-occurring temporalities is the reason why I draw upon scholars of slavery to talk about contemporary phenomena—they can’t be extricated from the historical violence that gave them meaning. It is also important to draw upon these scholars because those who create the archives themselves understand that they are embedded in a longer history of violence. 20 Further, by invoking wake work, I am already thinking about the ways it’s not possible to consider the past, past because “it is unfolding still.” 21 Structures of anti-blackness and queerphobia today are continuous with those of many decades ago even as they are distinct from them.

To think about my sites of research and the work that they do, I invoke K. J Rawson’s expanded definition of the archive which includes not only the normative conceptualization of the archive as a series of documents but also a theoretical aspect which includes “the power dynamics, political motives, epistemological function, and affective currents of any archival project.” 22 For my project, this “theoretical” component is constituted by the attachments and investments queer people have to and in queer archives but also the forces that hope to marginalize and erase queer and trans lives. Those aspects in my counterarchives offer up “possibilities for seeing connections previously unexamined and for reordering our ontological taken-for-

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20 See figure 4A.
21 Sharpe, 20.
granted.” 23 It is informed by struggles against silences and misrepresentations and greatly informed by its historical context—something that is always tied to colonial and imperial violence, heteropatriarchy and white supremacy.

These counterarchives don’t just change the way we think about archives, but our relationship to archives too. These relationships to archives account for the backward, mundane, sad; archives that disappear or are hard to track down; and, archives that have many authors or are unofficial. Archives that do this are central to black studies and queer studies precisely because they are often scorned as marginal, outdated, unproductive or otherwise not worth dwelling on.

With so much negative (mis)representation of queer and trans people, this thesis—which explores digital tribute posts and queer reclamations of animated characters—sets out to affirm the transformative potential of imaginative queer and trans representations. I hope that the two case studies of queer claims and reconstructions that follow exemplify the agency and healing that can come from re-readings, bringing “new visual grammars into existence” that are informed by, but not necessarily constrained by, the long history of violence against queer and trans people of color. 24

Research Sites

Most of the conversations I studied take place on tumblr. tumblr is a social media platform in the sense that there are other people to interact with while on the site, but it offers users an opportunity to make different kinds of connections without having met these people in “real life.” “Anonymous” is not necessarily the best way to characterize user presence on the site. Many tumblr users list their name, age, location and post pictures of themselves as well as other biographical information that could easily be used to identify them. Though anyone curious enough to Google the user could potentially find a tumblr associated with that person, there is an unspoken expectation that others will respect the user’s desire to disconnect from those they know in real life, a sentiment that is found in the unofficial “tumblr rules” which begin with 1. No one knows of tumblbr.” (figure 1)

When I first joined tumblr in 2012, the “tumblr rules” were something that everyone was expected to repost to remind others of the kind of community tumblr was idealized to be. This screenshot of the tumblr rules emphasize the notion that tumblr should be a space away from “real world” problems. By removing themselves from their “real world” connections, tumblr users create their own community from scratch, usually around a certain aesthetic or political issue, allowing counterpublics to arise that may not already occur in the user’s waking life. 25

Why would tumblr users want to disconnect from those in “real life” in the first place? In her thesis about tumblr’s generative potential for those who are

25 In using the term “counterpublic,” I am gesturing to a whole body of literature about subcultural place and belonging. It is perhaps most famously discussed in Michael Warner’s Publics and Counterpublics who defines a counterpublic in opposition to a public because it “maintains, at some level, conscious of its subordinate status.” (56)
depressed, “Let’s Be Very Public With Our Suffering,” Patricia Ekpo’s provides analysis that could explain why some might want to swear by the “tumblr rules.” She writes, particularly in relation to queer users of color:

Users frequently discuss conceptions of tumblr as an idyllic sphere removed from the strictures of everyday oppression that minoritarian subjects face. There is a sense of increased freedom of expression felt in the so-called “social justice sphere” of tumblr, populated by users passionate about justice for a large range of identity and social issues. Tumblr is viewed simultaneously as a safe space in which minoritized users will not (or should not) encounter as many things that hurt them and as a space to avoid and escape the reality of injustices in “real life.

The Tumblr rules and the strict isolation from the real world by many users contribute to the utopian space that some users try to cultivate on the website. Because many Tumblr users deliberately avoid following people they know in real life and instead center their connections around shared beliefs, I think users are both more comfortable posting controversial, personal and depressing content on their blogs and responding empathetically and vulnerably to others. In her thesis, Ekpo concludes that Tumblr “is an exemplar platform for public expression of suffering and empathetic relationality” for queer people of color. In my reading, these connections help young people work through historical trauma.

Ekpo’s analysis matches what young people themselves are saying about their usage of social media. From her ethnographic work with social media using teens,

26 Patricia Ekpo, "Let's Be Very Public with Our Suffering: Tumblr's Online Depression and Queer Possibilities " (Brown University, 2015), 29.
27 Ibid., 5.
danah boyd observes that young people “imagine their audience to be those that they’ve chosen to friend or follow, regardless of who might actually see their profile.” This observation can give some insight into the kinds of counterpublics that young people want to create through their social media usage. Fans of *Steven Universe*, for example, may create an imagined world of queer tolerance based around the show so for someone to offer a different read is a refusal of community guidelines. At the same time, people may use tumblr posts to work through personal or communal grief by imagining new futures. While their specific intentions are unknown, I suggest that these online interactions gesture to something better than what is here. At the same time, they dare to wallow in the past and don’t necessarily seek to overcome it.

I also analyze Twitter posts to supplement the tumblr archives. Twitter, not dissimilar from tumblr, offers users the ability to post hashtags which can become points of connection for what Ekpo might call “empathetic relationality.” Hashtags allow for people with similar interests and sets of beliefs to share content with each other so that their posts don’t get lost amongst all of the other content online.

However, Twitter posts carry a different kind of charge. Twitter has always been a popular platform for consciousness raising. In the era of #sayhername, #blacklivesmatter and many other hashtags, it is possible to use hashtags to garner support from thousands of people. 28 Although all tweets on public accounts can be retrieved if you scroll down enough on a user’s profile and can also be found through Twitter’s archival search tool, in regular use, tweets are ephemeral. Though my thesis

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looks mostly to tumblr, the Tweets that I discuss are vital in supporting the tribute posts with another kind of discursive work.

Both Twitter and tumblr show users the newest content first, with new posts arriving instantaneously. This places users in a perpetual present even as they work through a non-linear fashion. tumblr and Twitter also both offer an unusual paradox—on one hand content posted online is said to be there forever, but because of the algorithms at work, posts seem to have a more ephemeral feel. Users of these sites are not creating content that will exist for long periods of time and preserving it to last, as with a traditional archive. Instead, they are posting more immediately, for themselves or people within their social circles.

While these sites don’t allow young people to necessarily escape violence and trauma, they serve as a way to mediate it. The fact of queer death may be inevitable because people like them are killed with impunity, but it can be mediated through different types of posts. Tribute posts can memorialize and help young people to mourn. Black tropes can be filtered through a character who is seen as popular depiction of black womanhood. These are only a couple the ways in which queer people of color use art mediums to live in the wake of anti-blackness.

**Chapter outline and methodology**

What follows are two case studies of online queer cultural production. I conceptualize claims to the animated characters of *Steven Universe* and tribute art for
trans youth who have died as sites of agency—a kind of wake work within queer archives. I explore the possibilities that they may offer, without not losing sight of their disappointments. With Rawson’s expanded definition of the archive in mind, chapter one explores trans tribute posts and the tumblr blogs they appear on. It adds to the conversations around the afterlives of slavery and values the queering of tropes often considered to be negative.

Chapter two looks at the way *Steven Universe* characters have been taken up by fans. In that chapter, I think through what it means to officially validate counterarchives and dismiss other ones. In both chapters I find queerness in the worldbuilding processes that come out of these contestations and forms of cultural production. The conclusion addresses questions about visibility and its traps and wrestles with the ways archives may never be fully “queer” and why we continue to strive toward a queerer future anyway.

This research treats internet content and animated characters as valuable parts of queer history because they document things that are ephemeral and would not appear in an official archive—part of what makes these archives queer in the first place. The work challenges the archival methods traditionally used and asks what is missing from accounts of queer life that privilege the positive and positivistic. In it, I hope to tell stories of ordinary queer people and analyze the counterhistorical methods used to preserve their memories. Our society places a premium on progress and “getting over it,” but for many marginalized people the ceaseless nature of oppression renders this impossible and undesirable. Therefore, it is important for
queer and black people to acknowledge the ongoing processes of anti-queerness and anti-blackness and determine how to mediate them for themselves.
Chapter 1
Trans Tribute Posts: Counterpublics in the Wake

where do all of the sad girls go?
when they told us it would get better
(but it didn’t).
when they told us to try harder
(but we couldn’t)?
where do all of the sad girls go?

Where do all of the sad girls go?
-Alok Vaid-Menon, Femme in Public 1

I begin with the words of trans poet Alok Vaid-Menon as a reminder that queer and trans people can and do exist, in spite of all of the anti-queerness in the world. And ultimately, this chapter is about the young queer people who rally around queer and trans figures online, even if those people are no longer alive. It may seem that talking about tribute posts to teens lost to suicide simply adds to the chorus of negative representation of queer and trans people on the internet. Too often, the only time trans people are in the news is because another one has been tragically murdered, or the government wants to eliminate protections that were only tenuously held to begin with. At the same time, not every queer and trans person is visible—Caitlyn Jenner’s visibility is one great example of this. But what about the young queer people who exist in the shadows or only with conditional visibility?

In the epigraph, Alok Vaid-Menon, a trans poet and activist of color, questions what happens to the queers whose stories don’t have feel-good endings especially as they navigate the daily trials and tribulations of life. I first heard this poem performed in 2016, in the wake of the gay marriage decision. A long-time critic of incremental change for lesbian and gay people, Vaid-Menon brings our attention to the fact that so many people don’t have anyone to relate to because our society puts a premium on stories of triumph and joy—of progress. As Heather Love notes, so much of queer history is a history of loneliness, invalidation and a sense of backwardness but our current discourses don’t acknowledge this. ² Vaid-Menon refuses this in this poem and their other writing; one of my favorite quotes of theirs is “what would it mean to really hold and engage with trauma, not see it as something to dismiss, privatize or move beyond?” Their work refuses the belief that “sad” feelings are meaningless and insists that there needs to be room for “the sad girls.” What about the people whose lives don’t get better? What happens to those who get left behind so that life can be better for “good” subjects? Who documents the history of those whose stories are not one of increasing LGBT acceptance?

In my research, I found that many of “the sad girls,” those who are marginalized and despondent, go to tumblr. Ekpo argues that tumblr, even as it is characterized as a site for people and content that is extremely depressing, is life sustaining. ³ She comes to this conclusion by rethinking the function of depression through scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich and Alison Kafer who “take up depression

² Love, 147.
³ Ekpo, 9.
and other disabilities as social, cultural, and historical phenomena with particular ramifications for minoritized populations.” 4 The work these queer studies scholars do has begun to be brought into conversation with work in black studies. For example, Cvetkovich draws upon Hartman to discuss the particular form of affectively charged re-memory that black populations engage in. 5 Thus, I am adding to an already existing scholarly symbiosis between queer and black studies by wedding Cvetkovich’s and Love’s work with Sharpe’s. Scholars in black studies extend the work of queer studies scholars by exploring the particular intersections of blackness and grieving.

    tumblr specifically is a site that is often taken up by the most marginal in society. This is because it operates as a sphere where youth are not policed by their parents or peers and thus feel as though they can be whoever they want. 6 Unsurprisingly, because it is already seen as a safe haven—as I mentioned in the introduction—tumblr gives rise to a lot of utopian thinking, something I see in trans tribute posts and the afterlives they generate. Gesturing to the utopian through illustration, being present on tumblr creates queer counterpublics of people united by their “modes of attending to…death and…suffering.” 7

    Moreover, tumblr is a queer space in the sense that it is a site where depression is almost normalized and young people are able to express grief and

4 Ibid.
6 This sentiment is expressed by scholars such as danah boyd in her book It’s Complicated and validated by queer youth themselves.
7 Sharpe, 22.
sadness. tumblr, for Ekpo, and I argue for young queer people, is a place of backwardness where users can create archives of feelings for themselves and others they interact with online.\(^8\) This allows for rumination over some of the negative aspects of queer history and holds space for the violence that can happen at the intersection of anti-blackness and transphobia. Tribute posts, particularly those that are dedicated to queer youth of color, are points around which communities can form and dream for a better future—even if it is not yet one they can achieve in the “real world.”

Bringing together queer and black studies work on grief, memorialization, feeling backward, and wake work, this chapter analyzes tumblr tribute posts, focusing on how posts about Blake Brockington, a young black teenager, mediate the violence of his death. As I proceed, I also reference other young trans people and their tribute posts—primarily Leelah Alcorn, because her story is intertwined with his own. In this chapter, my aim is to conceptualize the queer mourning these posts do as wake work to better understand what it means to engage with the longer history in which these posts are embedded.

**Tribute Posts as Queer Archives**

Angel wings, fairy wings and butterfly wings, gowns, halos, superhero costumes, flower crowns, stars, outer space. #Hisnamewas, #hernamewas #TransLivesMatter. These are a few of the motifs and hashtags that appear in tribute posts for trans youth, including Leelah Alcorn and Blake Brockington, after their death.

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\(^8\) Ekpo, 9.
highly publicized suicides. (Figures 2A, 2B and 3A 3B and 3C) Trans tribute posts are online media consisting of a combination of visual images and text memorializing trans youth including poems, photos, makeshift memorials and illustrations. Most of the posts are digitally illustrated portraits in many different styles, some are painted and nearly all of them contain text that affirm the young trans person’s, or people’s, gender pronouns and chosen name(s). These posts appear on many social media platforms, but I focus specifically on tumblr and Twitter.

Tribute posts can take many forms and memorialize a number of different topics. Tributes can be made to dead celebrities, animals, or even things that are non-animal or have never been alive. This chapter looks specifically at tribute posts to trans youth who have died of suicide. These kinds of tributes are similar to, but distinct from, another kind of tumblr post I explore later in the chapter that I call awareness posts (figures 3A and 3B). Tribute posts are distinct because they explicitly intervene in the way young trans people are memorialized. With so much negative representation of trans people, these posts do the important work of attempting to create more accurate representations and counter what feels like a climate of anti-trans and anti-black sentiment.

I conceptualize these tribute posts as part of a queer archive. This archive is not just queer in the sense that it documents the lives of queer people, or because it provides an alternative history to the official account from parents and journalists. It is queer because it ruminates and refuses to forget its subject matter. In a society that is concerned with “moving on” or “moving past,” to dwell is considered backward, wrong and pathological. However, much of queer history has necessitated negative
emotions because of the shame, stigmatization and loneliness that characterized queer life. In her aptly titled book *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love asks what might be gained from dwelling on the negative feelings associated with queer history such as “nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness.” 9 Though these feelings are associated with disintegration of the self, Love recognizes their centrality in a shared queer history. These posts, similarly, bring together those who empathize with queer suicide so that they may ruminate together.

For Cvetkovich, these “bad feelings” can be the “foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them.” 10 Tumblr and Twitter, where users actively choose who they follow (often based on shared interest as opposed to “real-world” friendship), offers the perfect space to connect to other people who feel similarly. 11 I see these posts as positive and valuable reflections of queer people especially because they were occasioned by tragedy and loss, and I explore how these posts create community contribute to larger projects of living in the wake of anti-trans sentiment. The ease with which users can publish information allows for virtually anyone to become a historian and memorialize those who may otherwise be forgotten and fight against queer erasure.

While other scholars have written about the political work tribute posts can spur and some researchers have identified the posts as material that can contribute to

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9 Love, 4.
11 boyd, 32.
suicide contagion, my work looks more closely at the intrinsic worth these posts have for queer people and the counter-archival work they are involved in. Because many trans youth are survived by parents who did not accept their trans identities, their remembrance is often under gender identities and names they did not use. Blake Brockington and Leelah Alcorn were both misgendered in their deaths, in obituaries, articles and on gravestones. Leelah predicted this and in her last words, asked anyone who cared about her to memorialize her as she saw herself, not how their parents saw her. Posts were also made in Blake’s name, mindful of naming him and gendering him correctly, but also noting what made him different from Leelah—his race (figures 4A and 4B). Tribute posts, many of which explicitly contain the name and pronouns of the memorialized offer narratives that run counter to “official” documentation. Others highlight an aspect of a person’s identity that may be erased or whitewashed.

Tribute posts certain have their limitations and their recirculation may bring up more negative feelings than positive ones. This, however, is the point. As I mentioned in the introduction, I agree with much of Hartman’s analysis of the violence of the archive—it is always incomplete and thus can never fully tell a

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14 I refer to both Leelah and Blake by their first names to respect their chosen names and also to acknowledge that they are still children (as seventeen-year-olds). Black boys especially are not allowed the privilege of childhood because they are imagined as older and more dangerous than they are because of racist stereotypes. Therefore, I want to work against this tendency in this thesis.
15 annamagda4christ, "Leelah Alcorn’s Suicide Note [Full Text]," https://catholictrans.wordpress.com/2015/01/03/leelah-alcorns-suicide-note-full-text/.
complete story of the marginalized. Tribute posts, though embedded in a different historical time period, still fall short in their attempts to re-member the dead. I ultimately choose to discuss the stories that young queer trans people on this internet create for those who can no longer speak for themselves because I believe they allow those who are still alive to perform wake work. I argue that the imaginative work people on the internet provides counternarratives that attempt to mediate the violence of the archive even if it may not be possible to completely overcome it. I also claim that the tribute posts in question defend against trans erasure and contribute to the important work of attempting to I argue that it is important to memorialize and sit with the deaths of those who may otherwise be forgotten.

**Distinct Representations: Leelah Alcorn and Blake Brockington**

Undoubtedly, tribute posts to young trans people existed before Leelah Alcorn. And certainly, there were other posts about violence against trans people that circulated on tumblr. These posts, which I call awareness posts, express general sentiments about treating queer and trans people with love and respect (Figures 5A and 5B). Awareness posts can also be involved with mediating oppressions such as anti-trans sentiment. However, I don’t conceptualize them as tribute posts because they don’t deal directly with human beings who have passed, which is a crucial aspect of wake work.

A combination of timing, place (and its attendant religiosity) and the call to action expressed in her suicide note catapulted Leelah into the national and

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16 Hartman, 14.
international spotlight. Leelah Alcorn was a seventeen-year-old white trans girl from semi-rural Ohio. She came from a hyperreligious family who rejected her trans identity during her life and continued to do so after her suicide. In her note she predicted that her family would continue to misgender her, so she urged her tumblr followers to counter it:

When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After 10 years of confusion I finally understood who I was. I immediately told my mom, and she reacted extremely negatively, telling me that it was a phase, that I would never truly be a girl, that God doesn’t make mistakes, that I am wrong. If you are reading this, parents, please don’t tell this to your kids. Even if you are Christian or are against transgender people don’t ever say that to someone, especially your kid. That won’t do anything but make them hate them self. That’s exactly what it did to me.”

The tone of Leelah’s note offered a call to action that was taken up by many across the world. It’s difficult to track the dates when the tributes to her came into being because tumblr does not utilize time stamps and its algorithm is unclear. What is clear is that more than three years after her death, she remains an important figure for trans people. Posts mentioning trans day of remembrance, the anniversary of her

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17 Garrett and Kinder.
18 annamagda4christ.
death offer insight into the fact that she continues to be mourned and cherished by queer and trans people more than three years after her death.

She was right. Doug and Carla Alcorn referred to Leelah by her dead name (the name she was given at birth) in interviews and on her tombstone. They also buried her in a suit which was metaphorically, and somewhat literally, intended to be the final nail in the coffin of her trans identity. By laying her to rest in what are traditionally men’s clothes, Leelah’s parents attempted to put an end to her as Leelah. For people on the internet, this was an act of erasure that wrongly documented Leelah’s life. The pieces of artwork they created reclaimed Leelah, giving her a new life.

Leelah, whose famous last words include “fix society,” galvanized people on the internet who were outraged at the transphobia she experienced. “Fix society” and “don’t tell this to your kids” became rallying cries for anyone who cared about the lives of trans youth. Leelah encouraged anyone who cared about her to memorialize her with her name and pronouns, since she knew her parents would not.

Blake became a bit of a celebrity his senior year of high school when he became North Carolina’s first known trans homecoming king. This process, which he described as so exciting “he couldn’t say anything” is documented in a short documentary about his life called BrocKINGton. In it, he expresses many of the happy moments that came along with winning homecoming king and other activist endeavors, but also reflects on the homecoming experience as a time when he felt he

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19 Garrett and Kinder.
had been living a lie and would never be accepted as a “real boy.” 21 His story regarding the invalidation of his identity is similar to Leelah’s whose parents also would not accept her gender identity.

There are thousands of posts that come up for Leelah when you search her on tumbr. Blake Brockington, a black trans boy and activist, had far fewer posts when I first looked him up in June 2017, and the posts that exist are very different from Leelah’s because many of them make reference to his race. In November, I searched his name again and several dozen posts appeared (the timing is significant because it is close to Transgender Day of Remembrance, an important time for queer archiving and healing). Though there were more posts, many of them were not tributes but rather users criticizing the fact that people weren’t memorializing Blake at the same rate as Leelah. 22 I originally ignored these posts because they don’t immediate look like tributes. However, I realize that they too produce the archive by questioning and contesting its contents.

In calling attention to Blake’s blackness and the ways in which it has obscured his ability to be remembered, tumblr and Twitter users ask others to remember youth in their specificity and not allow them to be whitewashed. The tributes to him reflect

21 Ibid.
22 Ultimately, for my purposes, the number of post each of these young people have is not of importance. A dozen posts or twelve thousand can still accomplish the same kind of work—they challenge misrepresenting and what it means to mourn someone who has died. I take seriously what tumblr users are saying about the disproportionate number of representations of Leelah vs. Blake and their suspicions that racism factors heavily into this reality. These are important observations, but I don’t want the focus to be on what Blake lacks so that I don’t exacerbate this phenomenon. Instead, I am particularly interested in the ways in which tumblr users have fought against trans, specifically trans of color, erasure.
on the entanglements of gender and blackness. Creating tributes to trans teenagers like Blake do necessary wake work.

When it comes to trans tribute posts, artists tend to draw inspiration from photos posted by the trans youth they want to depict. Blake’s photos stand out because most of the photos of him are not selfies, but pictures of himself doing activist work or at his homecoming king crowning. The large number of photos of this type, the documentary about his life and Blake’s reputation as a trans activist, all affect how others depict him.

For others, the fact that they are selfies is significant because a selfie is a photo taken by the person in the photograph themselves. Through the “selfie,” the photographer gets to define the way they are pictured in ways that a photograph taken by someone else may not. In the most popularly reblogged rendering of Leelah, she is wearing a white dress, proud of the way she looks in it (Figure 6A). The original photo is captioned, “I don’t take many selfies because I hate how I look as a boy and I rarely get a chance to dress as a girl, so I’m only posting 5, but this year was a big year for me. Thank you all for being kind and supportive!” 23

For Leelah, this selfie was an opportunity for her to express her confidence in the way she looked. But this gesture, as with selfies taken by other marginalized people, represents more than just a chance for Leelah to show off her dress to her followers—it is a political act. 24 Leelah, through her uns sureness of whether or not

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she should post the photo, appears to be cognizant of the fact that she might not pass as a girl in the photo so to post it anyway is a way she challenges the politics of passing. However, even if she didn’t have an opinion on her “passing” as a girl, her selfie makes a political statement that says that she should be seen as a girl just as cisgender girls should.

Leelah’s selfie is an especially important gesture because the selfie is seen as a highly feminized self-portrait. According to Jill Walker Rettberg in her analysis of why selfies are scorned by so many people (soliciting phrases such as “go fuck your selfie”), the issue is that women have used them to have some autonomy over how they are represented, something that is scorned in Western society as feminine, narcissistic and vain.25 When users repost the photo or their own renditions of it, they reaffirm Leelah’s claim to womanhood and negotiate trans womanhood even if it is taboo (Figure 6B).

As I mentioned above, the photos that inspired Blake’s tributes are not selfies. This, however, does not mean that they can’t still do subversive representational work. It is unclear who took the photos but, judging by his apparently still figure, they were taken consensually (Figure 7A). In this particular photo, Blake holds his hands up with his palms forward, potentially gesturing at something unrelated to his blackness, but because the gesture is performed by a black man, it immediately reads as a proclamation of innocence: hands up, don’t shoot. Though the gesture has historically been used to indicate to the police that you are not a threat, it is also tied

to the “hands up, don’t shoot” phrase that, after the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, is uttered when people of color feel threatened by cops.  

The drawing of Blake (Figure 7B) renders the photo of him as a cartoon. Though the illustration of Blake appears to be smiling, because of his upward facing hands and the list of names of black men who have been killed by the police on his shirt, it is difficult to forget his blackness even in the realm of fantasy. In her book *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, Lisa Marie Cacho interrogates the ways in which criminality is rendered unintelligible without a black or brown body and by extension implicit with any image of a black or brown person. Cacho, recognizing that engaging with these images is not as easy as simply rejecting them—the relational characteristics of value would require the devaluing of another group in its place. reminds us that wake work, this case in the form of working through representation, is a project of failure but not defeat.

Mention of anti-black state violence is found in many of the posts to Blake which shows that some tumblr users have a different conception of the cause of Blake’s death and sets him apart from Leelah. By discussing racism and structural oppression in relation to Blake’s death, these users hint at the complexities that might drive someone to suicide, particularly if they are black. They also acknowledge the longer history of violence in which Blake’s death are embedded.

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26 Lauren Williams, "Hands up, Don’t Shoot: The Images That Define Ferguson’s Protests," (2014).
28 Ibid., 31-32.
When others make artists renderings of these trans youth, they attempt to depict them as they would have wanted to be seen. This is perhaps why there are few, if any, artist renderings of the youth before their transition, because these images would recreate the same transphobic violence that comes along with misgendering and other harmful methods of misrepresentation.

When depicting trans youth, artists often add embellishments to the characters and their surroundings. A common motif is angel wings, as depicted in the drawings of Leelah and Blake, which seems to suggest that they have passed into a different life. In Leelah’s fan art, the facial expression of the angel suggests that Leelah is happier wherever she went to. These posts queer Christian imagery because Christianity is frequently used against these youth. Instead, it is used in the posts to give them agency in a disidentificatory way. Both of these posts feature the language of afterlife with “you are free now” and “rest in power.” These posts, perhaps unintentionally, flip the religious sentiment that was pervasive in both Charlotte, North Carolina and Lebanon, Ohio--Blake and Leelah’s respective hometowns.

In these ways, the images of Leelah and Blake disidentify with normative understandings of race and gender. In Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, José Muñoz explains that “to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.” By associating with womanhood and

29 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.
childlike innocence, Blake and Leelah make room for themselves within categories of which they are not supposed to be a part.

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* Christina Sharpe discusses M. NourbeSe Phillip’s poem “Os.” The poem begins with the words “defend the dead,” which she does by creating a narrative about those who jumped off of a slave ship, even while using ledgers and other materials from secondary sources. To “defend the dead” means attempting to represent them in ways that are life-giving, which Phillip does by allowing the names of the enslaved to hold together the poem. In this way, Phillip does wake work by mediating the erasure of black African lives. Those who wish to memorialize young trans people do wake work in a similar way by allowing positive depictions of these trans youth to drown out any violent representations that may be in the media.

This kind of wake work is accomplished by hashtags such as #Hisnamewas or #Hernamewas. These hashtags attempt to drown out the misgendering and deadnaming the media perpetuates but also necessitate the viewer to look back on who was (Figures 8, 9A, 9B and 9C). This temporal move requires that viewers grapple with the fact that someone like Blake Brockington was alive and reflect on the reasons he is no longer here. At the same time, it is a way of defending those who have died by publishing content with their chosen name.

Hashtags like #hernamewas and #hisnamewas look to the past so that those in the future will know how these young people saw themselves. At the same time, they acknowledge that a human being is no longer here in the present by using the past tense “was.” To say “hisnamewasblake” is to profess again and again his identity as
Blake. This repetition makes sure that correct depictions of Blake are the norm.

Ironically, social media—something that is usually considered shallow and invalid is used to validate Blake’s queerness and blackness.

Conflicting Readings of “Rest in Power”

In my reading, tribute posts are a way of healing and hurting simultaneously, and they create new queer communities out of the pain of the present. Not everyone thinks this is a good thing. Public health officials claim, with evidence, that tribute posts can contribute to what is called “suicide contagion.” Suicide contagion is the phenomenon that leads to an increase in suicides and suicide attempts in the wake of a widely publicized suicide/suicide attempt. According to a study published in a British medical journal in 2014, suicide contagion is exacerbated by “front-page stories, big headlines, pictures of the deceased and details on or allusions to the method of death.” 30 Many of these factors can be found regularly on tumblr where they are reposted and reblogged. Sometimes these posts are removed by its moderators, much to the dismay of queer young people who believe that it is a way to silence them and remove any trace of these horrifying but impactful posts. 31

In addition to actively deleting suicide notes and other posts that mention suicide or self-harm, searches for the term “suicide” are redirected to a page asking, “everything ok?” (Figure 10A) The page that appears offers a number of resources to those who may be considering suicide and a large button offering the user a way to

30 Dewey.
31 Ibid.
“go back,” or rather, move forward. One of the links leads to a tumblr page called “you matter” that posts uplifting messages that are evidently supposed to “let people know that suicide is preventable,” the assumption being that those searching for material related to suicide would want to go through with the act (Figure 10B). 32 I am sure that, for many, this is exactly the kind of message that they need to see. But, I wonder about what kind of generative potential sitting with trans suicide offers to other queer young people.

On multiple occasions, tumblr staff have attempted to prohibit the spread of Leelah’s suicide note on the platform, sparking much outrage. This move is seen as an attempt to silence trans people regardless of intention. A journalist such as Caitlin Dewey applauds the work that the “you matter” blog can do. This is not to say that people may look at tribute posts or other posts mentioning suicide and have a potentially dangerous psychic response. However, I think it is simplistic to claim that nothing valuable can come of bearing witness to representations of queer death. As Love explains, much of queer culture is associated with “bad feelings” that unite rather than break down people.

In the article, “Inside Tumblr’s teen suicide epidemic,” Dewey goes on to critique the use of the phrase “rest in power,” a hashtag or phrase commonly used when marginalized people pass away, which she believes suggests that the act of suicide is empowering. Instead, she suggests that young people should instead share messages that stress that suicide is not the answer. This logic suggests that tumblr is a place that only breeds suicide contagion and doesn’t offer anything positive for its

users. Ekpo counters this logic by arguing that tumblr is life sustaining. Leelah herself expresses the ways in which tumblr was an incredibly important space for her and she was distraught when her parents took it away from her. 33

Dewey fails to look into the history of the usage of the phrase “rest in power” and thus misunderstands the sentiment behind it. It appears to have gained popularity within the hip hop community and then used by the LGBT community as well. 34 Rather than suggesting that suicide is a valiant or courageous act, the phrase attempts to return power to individuals whose marginalized status was produced and reinforced by structural violence against them. It also serves as a reminder that the deceased will not be forgotten and that their memory will reverberate throughout the community.

Ultimately, Dewey falls prey to her own assumptions about the internet and her own normative understandings of mourning. Decontextualized readings of online media production such as this are not only examples of bad research but also ways to silence and marginalize those who use media like tribute posts to grapple with queer death. Making tribute posts allows young people to grapple with black and queer death and what it means to them. These posts do more than martyrize queer youth—they try to give them new lives through illustration.

**Conclusion: Rejection of “It Gets Better” ideology**

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33 anamagda4christ.
People like Dewey are believers in the idea that things will get better for queer youth after they get older. This is a sentiment that is alluring but reveals some pitfalls within projects such as It Gets Better campaign.\textsuperscript{35} The It Gets Better project’s emphasis on American Dreamlike mobility is unable to deal with those whose lives don’t get better, at least not for the time being. \textsuperscript{36} This leaves LGBT young people who are unable to leave their current situations waiting for the “better” and with no tools allowing them to negotiate their identity until then.

It Gets Better is antithetical to living in the wake. The project is invested in a progress narrative that is not only inaccessible to many people, but also cannot value the “backward” grieving and re-memory that queer youth may want to take part in.

The tribute posts that I discuss allow young people to meaningfully engage death and grapple with what it means to not get better—this is wake work. Tribute posts and the space for grieving that tumblr as a platform offers allow for queer young people to recirculate these tribute posts without the insistence on “getting better.”

\textsuperscript{35} The It Gets Better campaign is a project created by Dan Savage and his partner that aims to combat LGBT suicides. Its message, “it gets better” is most frequently transmitted through videos where celebrities and public figures tell young people that their lives will get better. The subtext is that LGBT youth will find greater acceptance after they grow up and are able to live in cities, which has been criticized for being metronormative and classist. See chapter 8 in Queering the Countryside for more background on the project and its criticisms.

Chapter 2
Not Just Space Rocks: Imagining Queerer Futures Through Subcultural readings of Steven Universe

As someone who spent all of their senior year of high school figuring out how to leave their conservative small town, I know that there is a lot of power in imagining different futures someplace else. The only LGBT people I knew were white and much older than me, something that hasn’t changed too much in the three and a half years I’ve been away from home. Meanwhile, white gay and lesbian people are increasingly represented in popular youth media (the recent teen drama Love, Simon is just one testament to this), but many young self-identified queer people of color lament the dearth of representation of people who look, sound, and act like them. ¹ Movies such as Love, Simon can only offer representation of gay identity that is heavily whitewashed and almost too tolerant of difference, its upper middle-class slant smoothing over variegated queer experiences. ² ³ Of course, queer people of

³ Love, Simon is a 2018 film about a closeted teenage boy who falls in love with an anonymous classmate online and is then blackmailed by another classmate who threatens to out him to his school. Eventually, Simon is outed but receives
color exist regardless of whether or not they are on our screens but young people still complain about never seeing anyone who looks like them.

Writer Daniel D’addario from TIME magazine, for instance, doesn’t deny the power of LGBT representation—whatever it looks like—but wonders if movies like Love, Simon are what today’s youth need. He expresses that the hyper-encouraging tone of the movie is so unrealistic for many young LGBT people that it is almost comedic. D’addario argues that people who can relate to Simon’s supportive school environment and gay positive parents already experience a gay utopia—more or less—and therefore do not need to see themselves reflected in Simon. ⁴ Though he doesn’t explicitly mention race or gender, it is clear that D’addario believes that the movie is not representing the histories that produce queer of color subjectivity. What is necessary is thinking about queer imaginaries that take into account the lives of queer and racialized young people and their particular histories that engage with their current struggles.

Enter Steven Universe. ⁵ In my quest to understand how queer young people of color identify with different characters, I found a vibrant fandom on tumblr which

unconditional support from his friends, family and classmates. At the end of the movie the anonymous classmate reveals himself to Simon and they begin a romantic relationship together. See the Wikipedia entry for Love, Simon for more plot information.

⁴ D’addario.

⁵ Officially, the plot of Steven Universe is about three alien rebels from outer space called “Gems” and the half-Gem, half human son of their former leader (Steven). These aliens (Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl) and Steven, collectively called the “Crystal Gems” are tasked with protecting the Earth from the Homeworld Gems and their colonization project that threatens to destroy the planet. (Figure 14B) The four of them live and go on missions together on Earth and in Space. See the Steven Universe Wikia for more information about the plot of the show.
is premised on an understanding that the characters of *Steven Universe* (a children’s TV show) are precisely the needed examples of queer and racialized subjects. In this fandom, fans cosplay the characters and theorize about them on tumblr, defending them with a passion. Many of the conversations about the show and the communities that could form around were clearly important and generative. Some of the things that young people said about the characters included:

I’m still not over *Steven Universe*. Like – this is undeniably a children’s cartoon. And the scenes with Ruby and Sapphire are such important representations for kids. Tiny queer kids get to grow up watching this show. I literally cannot think about how vitally important this representation is without crying… ⁶ sammy431

As a mixed race nb female-presenting queer lady who has never, ever seen herself represented in media before, much less positively and sensitively…I have never ever consumed media before that has looked out into its audience and found my story among the more normative, the easier written, and said hey, you—you! We know you’re there. We know you matter. We know you are powerful and beautiful and important ⁷ mayatalksfemedia

I don’t think yall understand my appreciation for smoky quartz. I have her body type. I have her hair style. I have terrible depression and episodes of crippling self hatred. I am non-binary, and I would wear their outfit. Smokey (sic) was the representation I needed my whole life. I was never able to see myself as cute or pretty in media because there was no representation that fit me and what I go through. But smoky Quartz is just like me. ⁸ Softbeefyleaf

(Figures 12A, 12B and 12C)

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The interesting thing about youth identifications with the characters is that they latch on to seemingly problematic aspects of the characters’ racialization. Fans find solace in the usage of the “strong black woman trope,” for instance, and Garnet’s enlarged hips (Figure 14A). I see the ways that fans reimagine these tropes so that the characters can be role models as a way that the show is queered by fans. Though not immediately legible as ways of “marking, remembering and celebrating” figures who remain with us in the present, I theorize these interactions with age-old black tropes as wake work. With characters such as Garnet, fans are able to work through and with racist motifs and recognize that those stereotypes can be places for empowerment and identification.

Though I am looking at representation within *Steven Universe*, my goal here is not to argue that the answer to the discrepancy in representation is to create more representations like the Crystal Gems. To clarify, my goal here is to view the show and the conversations happening about it online as a cultural landscape where fans are able to work through the wakes of anti-blackness and anti-queerness. The conflicts with white fans, for my purposes, have more to do with their unattentiveness to the historical conflicts in which the characters of *Steven Universe* are embedded. Questions of whether white people cosplaying a black coding character is a form of blackface and the implications of erasing the character’s races and queerness is what I am more interested in. This is because fans engage in wake work by defending the characters in *Steven Universe* as queer and racialized beings from being whitewashed and desecrated.

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9 Rebecca Sugar, "Garnet’s Universe," in *Steven Universe* (2014).
In my research, I found incidents where fans attacked white people who cosplayed or drew art of the purported characters of color because of the ways in which these framings erase race. When a well-known tumblr artist created artwork that was seen as racist and anti-fat, some users responded with phrases such as “hahahaha kill yourself,” “Who cares if she dies?”, and “tbh I’m happy she probably killed herself.” (figure 11) In this case, Zamii070’s art was considered to be a threat to the queer and racialized script of Steven Universe. In a related but separate controversy, some of the fans wrote similarly vitriolic messages to a white people who cosplayed characters who code as black. These renderings of the characters were not simply drawings or bad cosplays but seen as attempts to erase the histories of anti-blackness and anti-queerness that made those characters legible.

To someone outside of the *Steven Universe* fandom, these vicious responses from teens and adults to what appear to simply be different renditions of animated characters in the artist’s own unique style may seem bizarre at the least. *Steven Universe*, after all, is a kids’ cartoon apparently geared toward young boys and preteens. The show, by virtue of its appearance during the Cartoon Network broadcast (which is intended for children aged 7 to 15) and not during Adult Swim (when content for mature audiences is aired) suggests that it was created to be a show

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10 John Guth, "Why the Steven Universe Fandom Is the Worst Ever,” The Odyssey Online.
11 On Commonsensemedia.com, a site that assesses the appropriateness of different television shows for younger audiences, *Steven Universe* was given a 10+ rating claiming that the show was more for “teens and tweens than young kids.” Parents disagreed, arguing that the show was appropriate for kids 8+. Other sites (such as Autostraddle.com) argue that the show isn’t solely appropriate for a single age group but provides “all age representation” that anyone can appreciate and benefit from watching.
for children and not for the older audience that argues about it on tumblr. ¹² Even for fans of the show, these hyperbolic attachments to the characters seem odd—it seemed ridiculous that anyone would send threatening messages to another young person for drawing fan art the “wrong way” or to a white person for dressing up as a purple alien. ¹³

But of course, fans of the show don’t think that the characters are just aliens or “space rocks.” The fans obsess over the characters’ identities: Garnet’s afro-like hair, Amethyst’s usage of AAVE and the fact that they live together as examples of racialized queer inhabitation. ¹⁴ Even though the screenwriters maintain that the characters don’t have genders or races, I see the ability of the fans to tap into black tropes and find positive role models a way the fans queer the show. ¹⁵ Taking this as fact and thinking through the historical structures that make these tropes legible, I analyze the controversies by exploring what it means for white bodies to take up those same tropes.

Unpacking the political work the representation of purportedly queer and racialized characters is claimed to do is vital to understanding why some people defend their readings of the characters with such aggression. Since identity is always politicized and claims to characters are almost always linked to one’s identity,

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¹³ Guth.
¹⁴ AAVE stands for African American Vernacular English and is a dialect spoken primarily by African Americans in North America.
cosplays and fan art devoid of historical context are not seen depoliticized depictions of the characters of *Steven Universe* but are understood to convey the cosplayer or artist’s politics. Within the subsection of this fandom that is invested in queer and racialized readings, claims that omit or oppose these major factors are seen as attempts to appropriate queer/racialized identity for the wrong reason. For fans of the show, even animated figures must be seen in the historical context which includes an all-encompassing antiblackness that colors continues to take new forms all the time.¹⁶

As with trans tribute posts, I conceptualize the conversations happening about *Steven Universe* as part of a complex, queer counterarchive that exists in conjunction (sometimes opposed, sometimes alongside) to the storyline of the show itself. Just as someone may curate an online presence for themselves, some tumblr users are compelled to construct a story about the characters of *Steven Universe* that reclaims, for their own identity work, seemingly racist tropes. What I find to be queer about these reclamations is not that they are made by queer people. As in the previous chapter, I use queer not in an identitarian way (although this is how some fans use the term) to refer to gender and sexual variation. Instead, I use queer in this context to refer to ways of being that are oppositional to normative categories of power. What is queer about the fan investments is that the conflicts that arise position these fans as a part of a counterpublic that wishes to think of the representations in their specificity.

Even as I recognize the potential in these archives, I’m also interested in the ways that these archives rely on the social norms they seek to undermine. For

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instance, fans insist on “canonizing” their readings, tearing down the work done by others and appealing to authorities (the screenwriters) for approval. This tension places these alternative archives somewhere between queer and normative, revealing the problematic that is “queer” itself.

The history of violent exploitation in the United States, particularly the history of black exploitation, and its not-yet-reckoned-with afterlives, means that even contemporary examples of theft invoke these ghosts.\textsuperscript{17} Thinking about the entanglements of history and fantasy helps us understand such strong fan responses to problematic cosplays and drawings that critics understand only to be part of a cartoon world with no “real world” implications. I look at the ways in which fans queer the narrative of the show and develop queer attachments to racialized tropes.

What follows is a discussion of the types of mediums and methods fans of \textit{Steven Universe} use to reinscribe meaning in the characters. After laying out an overview of what kind of work fans of the show create, I delve into two major areas where fan readings have been contested—cosplay and fan art. I argue that these debates create a queer archive that opens up (queers) the racial tropes provided by \textit{Steven Universe} and offers a means through which anti-blackness is mediated. I end by exploring ways in which the \textit{Steven Universe} conversations can be seen as wake work to mediate a world in which anti-blackness is omnipresent.

\textbf{Overview of Steven Universe Fan Cultural Production}

\textsuperscript{17} Here, I am referencing Saidiya Hartman’s notion of the “afterlives of slavery” that she discusses in \textit{Scenes of Subjection} and finds a phrase for in \textit{Lose Your Mother} (pg 6). This will be discussed further below.
On tumblr, fans of *Steven Universe* express their love of the show in many ways. Sometimes it is in the form of cosplay, art or speculation—none of which are mutually exclusive. These interpretations, whether invested in queer and/or racialized readings, are what produce the fandom. Searching “*Steven Universe*” on tumblr brings up thousands of posts theorizing about the show, arguing about each character’s racial coding, and showing off fan art, gifs and other memes about the characters (figure name here).  

Fan art, which is discussed in greater detail below, is simply fan renderings of characters usually through illustration and painting, either in print form or digitally. Many fan artists have their own style of depicting characters and are commissioned by other fans to draw characters in that specific style.  

Though fans and their cultural production have previously been pathologized and written off as nonsensical, Henry Jenkins in the late 1980s centered fan readings of texts as processes that made fans into fans, and not only as simple attachments to a text. In calling the process by which fans appropriate texts “textual poaching,” Jenkins suggests that fan readings take back texts and imbue them with meaning themselves. He borrows from Michel de Certeau who considers textual poaching as “an impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable.” Within the *Steven Universe* fandom, fans participate

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18 Gifs are short video clips that are often used as memes. Memes, according to Merriam Webster are “humorous image[s], video[s] piece[s] of text…that [are] copied (often with slight variations and spread rapidly by internet users.


21 Ibid.
in these kinds of pleasurable thefts: re-readings or alternative readings that can exaggerate, construct or build relationships between characters seen as queer. These readings queer the storyline and offer new possibilities through alternative imaginaries—creating a new queer world through these imaginative investments.

Young people also pay homage to the series by participating in character roleplay, or, costume roleplaying. Though the word cosplay is relatively new, the phenomenon of costume roleplay is not new at all. 22 The forerunner to cosplay as we know it began with the practice of dressing up in outfits inspired by works of science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s but has a longer history of participation at Renaissance fairs. 23 Nicolle Lamarichs understand cosplay as a phenomenon that occurs when fans first choose a character and then try to emulate them, often both physically and in the ways they interact with other cosplayers. This usually begins with creating a costume, something that can be simple and inexpensive, or very time intensive and costly. This costume is often, but not always, worn to a convention where the character is further personified through a scripted performance. Fans who simply construct and wear costumes are not necessarily participating in cosplay, per se—cosplay ultimately requires further action that can be described as the interplay between the fan’s own identity and the narrative they construct about the fictionalized character they are embodying.

22 It was coined in the 1980s by Japanese game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered American fans dressing up and putting on roleplays about fictional characters (CITE). See also Nicolle Lamerichs, "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay," Transformative Works and Cultures 7 (2011).

23 Ibid.
Beyond the costume, according to Nicolle Lamerichs, cosplay is often “is a form of fan appropriation that transforms, performs and actualizes an existing story in close connection to the fan’s own identity.” 24 Cosplay cannot occur without some identity work, since choosing a character in the first place is a way to lay claim to them. The consideration of identity, according to Lamerichs, is what distinguishes cosplay from costuming. 25 In her conception, cosplay requires fans to consider the way their own identity informs the performance of the character in question—and as such is an opening to queer identifications, over-identifications, and disidentifications.

“Canon” is an interesting way for fans for refer to the series since “the canon” is typically white, male and racist. Nevertheless, when something is part of the canon, it is seen as legitimate and widely so. Fans of Steven Universe seem to appropriate this language to legitimate themselves in the face of screenwriter refusal to discuss the perceived human characteristics given to the Gems. In her dissertation “Inventing a universe: Reading and writing Internet fan fiction” Juli Parrish discusses what she calls “fanon” or fan theories that are reinscribed so many times or so persuasively that they become widely accepted in the fandom. 26 “Fanon” is not a word I encountered when studying the Steven Universe fandom; it seems to me that they purposefully stick to “canon” for the authority it conveys. Though fans do not use “fanon” to describe their cultural production, its definition is useful when exploring the

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Juli J Parrish, "Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction" (University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 33.
phenomenon of fan production that isn’t necessarily endorsed by the screenwriters, but that is generally agreed upon online. For instance, Garnet’s blackness, Rose’s fatness, or the queerness of Ruby and Sapphire’s relationship all seem to be self-evident to the fans who watch the show. However, without explicit approval from the screenwriters, all of these characteristics are technically “fanon.”

In my research, I found that many of the conflicts surrounding cosplay and fan art hinged on the assumption that there are some things about the characters that ought to be accepted as canonical amongst fans. Sometimes, readings of characters are confirmed as canonical by the screenwriters such as was the case in this exchange between a Twitter user and Ian Jones-Quartey, the show’s former co-executive producer, that revealed that Lars was half-Filipino (Figure 16). These official confirmations, which seem to be arbitrated by Jones-Quartey somewhat randomly, are very infrequent. More frequently, the producers and screenwriters are silent on characters’ suspected races, genders and sexuality. It is perhaps this unwillingness that has led fans to decide for themselves what is canon—something that occurs within small groups on the internet and occasionally becomes accepted as a general rule, judging by the sheer number of fans representing the characters in that same way.

However, because the internet is large and heterogenous, it is not possible for all fans everywhere to agree on what is “canon.” Even with hundreds of users on tumblr, Reddit and other social media sites claiming a character and representing them a certain way, there are inevitably fans who disagree either publically or privately. In my opinion, it is these contestations within the community that produce the queerness of the archive and they demonstrate the many ways the characters can
be read. However, there is an apprehension about those who disagree with the fanon-ized readings. This occurs through call out posts and sometimes even direct attacks on the representation or the artist themselves. When fans resort to such lengths, the queerness of an archive like this one is complicated. This is not only because canonizing their readings would make them the hegemonic reading, but also because such an emphasis on identititarianism runs in contrast to what the signifier “queer” attempts to accomplish. Gloria Anzaldúa’s argument that “identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes,” is particularly salient here. 27 Writing about her complex positioning in the literary world as a queer Chicana, she reminds us that subjectivity is not separate pieces that make up a whole. Rather, it is a result of intersecting measures of difference that are historically constituted. 28

Therefore, these performances or representations are never ahistorical. Fans immediately place representation and cosplay in historical context, especially in regards to the history of violence against black people in the United States, dating back to slavery. Even with varying understandings of this history, fans recognize the continuity between theft of black bodies in an historical context and what this looks like in the present day. For this reason, it makes sense that when the characters Garnet, Amethyst, and Sardonyx, the characters that are thought to be coded as black, are embodied or represented by white people, the response from fans is so strong.

Engaging with racialized characters in this way is a way to work through anti-blackness and is another way of living in the wake of slavery. Fans dislike white

28 Ferguson, 86.
cosplayers’s appropriate of certain characters because they don’t believe that the cosplayers meaningfully engage with the histories that inform modern iterations of the afterlives of slavery.

**Cosplaying while black/black while cosplaying**

In a photo that caused online controversy, a person who is apparently white dresses up as Amethyst (Figure 20A). She captions the photo “tbh I don’t even cosplay her, I am her” perhaps identifying with the fact that Amethyst is seen as a fat positive character (Figure 20B). However, as discussed above, Amethyst is seen as a black coding character in the fanon. In a case such as this, Amethyst is considered both fat and racialized at the same time canonically, leading to questions about whether or not a character’s race matters more than all other identity factors. With these contestations, fans are attentive to the particularity of experience and that Amethyst’s fatness cannot be disconnected from her race.

For some fans of *Steven Universe*, dressing up as characters that are considered racialized, whether skin color is changed or not, is a form of blackface. For Reddit user Sandalon, “blackface” encompasses more than just darkening one’s face; it also includes the practice of embodying the character, which in their conception is always racist when it is performed by a white person (Figure 19A). Technically speaking, this is not an accurate description of blackface, but the point is that some fans of Steven Universe see a resemblance between the historical phenomenon and modern-day appropriations of blackness and black bodies.
In Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class,

Eric Lott defines blackface minstrelsy as a “nineteenth-century theatrical practice…in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit,” a form of “borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery.” 29 Blackface minstrelsy performances relied on the unique history of African chattel slavery which literally allowed blacks to be bought and sold because of white power over black bodies. This phenomenon is unique but not dissimilar to white embodiment and representation of so-called characters of color. This violent appropriation that drives blackface minstrelsy is called to mind in white cosplays of black characters but not in the reverse—black people never owned whites. For that reason, black people cosplaying “white” characters doesn’t generate the same outrage.

Blackface minstrelsy was a way for lower class groups to assimilate into whiteness by degrading and positioning themselves in opposition to blackness—something that will remain in the minds of black and other racialized people indefinitely. 30 It may not be accurate for fans to talk about blackface in this way, but it appears that the phenomenon continues to affect white claims to characters in the present. However, it is also important to acknowledge specificity and acknowledge the differing time and place. This is something that some fans do recognize.

Garnet is legible to fans as a queer woman of color with racialized characteristics in the series. Garnet has wide hips, an afro-like hairstyle and purplish-

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red skin; she is also voiced by Afro-British actress and songwriter Estelle. All of these attributes are understood as black because black women are stereotyped in similar ways in the media, something that is generally considered reductive. Others argue that blackness is something that is unredeemable. Nevertheless, because of these stereotypes, fans are able to understand her as black and relate to her as such. These are characteristics that have been coded and recoded as black so many times historically and presently that it is difficult to divorce them from blackness.

Through conversations with my friends of color who watch *Steven Universe*, I have found that most consider Garnet to offer a positive depiction of black womanhood, despite the screenwriters relying on stereotypical conventions, at least aesthetically, to communicate the character’s blackness. This contributes to the difficulty the screenwriters have attempting to deny Garnet’s blackness—it is seemingly self-apparent in the way she has been drawn. The difference between a character like Garnet and one like Uhuru is that Garnet’s blackness is what gives her agency in the show, thereby adding to the plot and bringing increased attention to her racialized characteristics. In the *Steven Universe* episode “Garnet’s Universe,” for instance, Garnet saves the day with her “weighted hair” which detaches from her head and crushes her enemies. Her weighted hair appears to be a metaphor for African hair, which is often considered “too thick” or “too dense” and unable to be tamed. It is impossible to understand this act without a racial lens since afros are inextricably linked to blackness.

32 Sugar.
The above photos are examples of Garnet cosplays. I found these when I searched “Garnet Cosplay” on tumblr (figures 15A, 15B and 15C). In my reading of these images, they all depict black people cosplaying the character. Even after several minutes of scroll, there were no white people or even non-black people of color cosplaying Garnet that I could find (at least no people who so appeared to me), so I looked up “White Garnet cosplay” and found discussion about a white German woman who had literally donned blackface to embody the character (Figure 17). Additionally, on tumblr but also on Reddit, there were conflicts about whether or not embodying a black character as a non-black person may be considered blackface, as discussed above. Whether the lack of non-black Garnet cosplays is a result of fans policing cosplayers is unclear, but what was clear was that white cosplayers were received negatively, while black ones were not.

The critical reactions are easily understood if one understands cosplay the way Nicolle Lamarichs does. According to her, “cosplay is centrally concerned with embodying a character accurately.” Because of this, cosplayers often develop an increased awareness of their own bodies or choose a character that matches their own posture.” 33 Those whose physical embodiment and comportment is similar to the characters are considered to more “authentically” represent the characters.

Because the characters in Steven Universe that are purported to be queer and racialized are rarely specifically claimed as such by the screenwriters of the show, the ways that these readings are legitimized and perpetuated is through the fan discourse

33 Lamarichs.
about them. This, as I have mentioned above, can occur through the written theorization that fans partake in on tumblr and other sites. These fan readings are also expressed through the ways characters are represented visually—more specifically through fan art and through cosplay. Each one of these readings is a way of claiming the character for oneself and has become a point of contention—and therefore, of queer connection—within the online community.

**Erasing Race: Fan art’s racial politics**

At the same time conversations about race in the context of *Steven Universe* character cosplays surfaced on tumblr and Reddit, what some deemed politically incorrect drawings of characters were also called into question. The largest controversy surrounded tumblr user Zamii070. This person, whose notoriety in this fandom and others contributed to the attention her drawings garnered, drew a number of pictures that were considered to “whitewash” *Steven Universe* characters and spread anti-fat sentiment. It is unclear when Zamii070 originally published these pieces of artwork online, but she began receiving negative attention in the middle of October. (Figures 21A and 21B)

Basically, Zamii070 posted some images of her art on tumblr in October of 2015. Because of her deemphasis on certain characteristics such as race, size and queer relationships, some tumblr users lashed out against her—sending her death

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34 To be clear, there are numerous debates about *Steven Universe* many of which have to do with queerness which can be found online. As I wrote this chapter, my research focused in on the racial debates so debates about queerness aren’t forefronted in this thesis.
threats and mocking her alleged suicide attempt. This incident and the extreme responses that followed generated conversations about representation and appropriation. 35 Though I don’t condone the vicious reactions from fans, I am interested in what they can tell us about the politics of erasing racial characteristics of characters.

In the resulting conversations it is often difficult to discern which of the drawings are being referred to, but the sentiment is clear: in her fan art, marginalized characters were considered to be misrepresented; and, for fans, misrepresenting a character is to not only to attempt to take away that representation from others, but also to directly do harm to those who identify with those characters. (Figures 13A and 13B). In these drawings, the whitewashing occurs by giving the purportedly racialized characters features like that of a white person. This means that racial/ethnic difference is thought of solely in phenotypic terms which is interesting because, in the show, the way the characters comport themselves also conveys racialized meaning.

It is worth noting that Zamii070 is not the only fan artist who has been harassed after creating art devoid of racial specificity, though her case is the most notorious. This likely has to do with the fact that she was already known in the community for being problematic both online and offline at conventions. Additionally, for reasons that I could not discern, the “Zamii Hater Archive” was launched to very meticulously chronicle the incident dating back to October 2015 and with the most recent post coming out last month. 36 These factors, perhaps combined

35 Guth.
36 Besides making fan art that was considered problematic, there is documentation that Zamii070 made transphobic comments on Twitter. She is also alleged to be
with the high-profile conversations about appropriation, created the conditions necessary for the Zamii incident to blow up in the way that it did.

As these disputes unfolded, some tumblr users within the *Steven Universe* Tumblr counterpublic criticized the angry fans by calling them “social justice warriors” and overly “PC.” These same people were usually those who argued that the Crystal Gems were only “aliens” or “space rocks” and therefore could not have racial identities. These critiques pathologized the fans who were understood to be sending death threats about inanimate and imaginary objects. The issue is obviously that these people did not think that the Crystal Gems were just aliens or space rocks at all but reflections of themselves.

A few days after the suicide attempt, Zamii posted a photo of herself apparently upon her return from the hospital explaining her situation and that she was better. Many people, even those who ultimately supported her, were not convinced that she had been hospitalized, let alone had attempted suicide. Convinced that Zamii’s narrative had been fabricated, some cited white privilege as the reason why she was able to gain so much support from people on the internet; others claimed that she deserved what happened to her. Matriarchalmuffin went as far to say that she hoped Zamii would die, conflating a politically incorrect artist with systemic violence against black and brown people.

In a situation such as this, a young adult is accused of perpetrating the same kinds of violence as the police against black and brown people. The post isn’t meant friends with a known pedophile in the cosplaying community—something that other fans disproved of.

37 Guth.
to be hyperbolic; Matriachalmuffin very directly argues that people like Zamii are the reason why “blacks are being gunned down in the streets.” This post equates the lack of representation of people of color with police brutality and suggests that there is a violence to the lack of representation. If we bear in mind the history of violence against black people in the United States, this equation isn’t so far-fetched. Anti-black violence and the erasure of representation attempt to make black people disappear and white portrayals of black characters do something similar.

**Conclusion**

What is clear from the cosplay and fan art controversies is that the two art forms are embedded in a longer history of anti-black and anti-queer violence. Fans’ attentiveness to the violent history of black representation are reminders that the past is not past and it is still embedded in a longer historical context. In drawing attention to these ongoing histories and clinging so fiercely to the characters, the fans of the show engage in wake work.
For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it. ¹

--Heather Love, Feeling Backward

Conclusion: Feeling Backward, Looking Forward, Living in the Wake

In this thesis I explored the possibilities for worldbuilding and counterarchival work I saw in claims to “queer” and racialized animated characters and trans youth tribute posts. I read these online phenomena as gesturing toward better futures that are important to many queer people while at the same time lingering in the tragedy of black death and racist representation. In these readings, I explore how Sharpe’s wake work can be queer and how queer archives can do wake work.

For historically marginalized groups such as queer and trans people of color, disengaging with violent histories is not a viable option, but neither is becoming completely consumed by it. I argue that by mediating these phenomena through these online queer archives allows subjugated people to ability to navigate violence even if our language is limited and representation can only go so far. These sites draw attention to the potential for wake work. I chose only these two sites of analysis, but there are many more examples of what I consider to be queer wake work—too many to name in fact. Therefore, I do not offer my thesis project as the most important sites

¹ Love, 1.
to study or as perfect examples, but rather as a call to think about what is possible when we bring together concepts in black studies such as wake work and the backward turn in queer studies to theorize new archives, counterpublics, and the mediated work of queer people of color.

I began this project by considering the demand for representations of queer people of color—and the ways people produce and circulate their own images when those forms of self-representation are not readily available. As I conclude this thesis, I want also to address the politics of queer and trans visibility. Scholars writing on contemporary forms of documentation and the many types of archives that they make up have explored the pitfalls of representing trans and other queer folks. Although I affirm the power of the archive, I echo the authors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Vulnerability* in the sentiment that “when produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of ‘positive representation’ ultimately gives little support or protection to many” of those most affected by the regime. 2 With increased visibility, there can be an acceptance of certain forms of LGBT identity but backlash against others, usually those who are poor, trans and people of color. In this, I join with Dean Spade, Reina Gossett and others in criticizing the notion that visibility equals progress. I aim to decenter the cisgender gaze by focusing on the conversations that trans people themselves are having. I also highlight the power of non-traditional archives by looking to tumblr posts and conversations--dialogues that, theoretically, are accessible to a varied queer and trans audience.

2 Gossett, Burton, and Stanley.
However, in the end, I want to affirm that I do not think visibility is the sole goal of these queer archival projects. They appear to be, like wake work, ways for folks who deal with a great deal of violence to survive and make sense of the world. Understanding depictions of and cultural production by marginalized groups as queer wake work is a way to grapple with and challenge the forms of visibility-as-progress that shadow this project: insisting on queer worldmaking that does not let go of its grief. Wake work is not invested in visibility projects.

Like other trans, queer, and black scholars, I am left with an ambiguous conclusion. On the one hand, I join with Saidiya Hartman, who refuses to tell the story of her subjects because it would “trespass the boundaries of the archive” and would become a romance for her own comfort. On the other, the archive I am exploring, while linked, is not the same. At a time when the internet has allowed people to curate their lives, I want to affirm the potential of digital archives to enable people to tell their own stories and to find and build community by sharing formerly untellable stories.

There is something to be said here about the way illustration and fantasy have the ability to articulate alternative imaginaries. My sites of analysis aren’t always queer and, in many ways, turn to hegemonic means of articulation to be legible. However, the medium of illustration seems to offer a unique way of dealing with anti-black and anti-queer sentiment. Ramzi Fawaz when talking about comics in his book *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* argues that illustration has “vast representational capabilities” and “whatever can be

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3 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."
drawn can be believed.” 4 Similarly, when it comes to animated characters and trans tribute posts, the medium of illustration allows for people to imagine new worlds with different futures.

Illustration as a medium still relies on tropes we may associate with the subjugation of people of color and it, of course, cannot bring the dead back to life. Though limited, illustration allows queer people of color to mediate oppression and gesture toward new forms of representation that can revalue the devalued.

Ultimately, as I found through my research, it is not possible to articulate the future without looking to and dealing with the past. This doesn’t lessen the power of these projects, but exposes our inability to escape the constraints of our language. This project embraces the ambiguity of visibility and remembrance. I don’t search for a reason to justify the archives and I know that, despite anyone’s best intentions, visibility can always be a trap for many queer people. I don’t think this should be a reason to stop imagining “new visual grammars,” however. 5 What is clear from my research is that these counterarchives are vitally important means of denying the terms of “moving on” by embracing the wake.

5 Gossett, Burton, and Stanley.
THE (UNOFFICIAL) RULES OF TUMBLR

1. No one knows of Tumblr.
2. Do not mention Tumblr to non-tumblees.
3. Do not tell someone to get a tumblr.
4. When someone tags “instant reblog” you HAVE TO instantly reblog the post.
5. Don’t make a “FUCKYES!” page unless it doesn’t exist.
6. Don’t do follower train, THIS IS NOT MYSPACE.
7. DO NOT CONNECT TUMBLR TO TWITTER OR FACEBOOK.
8. RULE #1 IS A PRIME EXAMPLE TOWARD RULES #1 and 2 and 3.
9. Ranting is just a way of saying shit you wouldn’t say anywhere else.
10. ALL MEMES ARE ACCEPTABLE HERE.
11. Don’t be a spam. Post your thoughts here. Cause no one is gonna get you down here.
12. NUDES ARE TOTALLY ACCEPTABLE HERE.
13. Tumblr is not a porn site. NO FAPPING.
14. JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN TAKE PICTURES DOESN’T MEAN THEY WILL BE REBLOGGED.
15. EVERYONE ARE FRIENDS ON TUMBLR.
16. NEVER FOLLOW THE TUMBLR STAFF.
17. IF YOU DO somethings IN TUMBLR TROLL YOU ARE INSTANTLY GONNA BE BANNED.
18. ALWAYS FOLLOW THE RULES OF TUMBLR.
19. DON’T ASK PEOPLE TO FOLLOW YOU. You earn followers.
20. THIS IS AN INSTANT REBLOG.

Made by JPEGion. JPEGion.Tumblr.com

Figure 1 (above)

“Tumblr Rules”
jpeigion.tumblr.com (retrieved 23 November)

Figures 2A and 2B (right)

“Tributes to Leelah”

Ibid.
Figures 3A, 3B and 3C (counterclockwise)

“BHM2016”

“Rest in Power”

“Trans Lives Matter”


Figures 6A and 6B (right)

“Leelah Selie (repost)”

“You Are Free Now”

Figures 7A and 7B (left)

“Blake Brockington”

“Photo of Blake”
“Another Transgender Teen Committed Suicide”

“Twitter Tribute to Blake”

“Say [Blake’s] Name”

“His Name Was Blake”
Figures 10A and 10B (left)

“Everything OK?”

“You Matter”

Figure 11 (Compilation) (above)
Why the Steven Universe Fandom is the Worst Ever
Figures 12A and 12B (left) and 12C (below)

“Undeniably a children’s cartoon”
(retrieved 23 November 2017).

“Almost too good to be true”
(retrieved 24 November 2017).

“But Smoky Quartz is just like me”
(retrieved 23 November 2017).

I don’t think you all understand my appreciation for smoky quartz.

I have her body type. I have her hair style. I have terrible depression and episodes of crippling self hatred.

I am non binary, and I would wear their outfit.

Smokey was the representation I needed my whole life. I was never able to δΥ€ myself as cute or pretty in media because there was no representation that quite fit me and what I go through.

But Smoky Quartz is just like me.
Figures 13A and 13 (left)
"Universe family"

"Sworn to the Sword"
Ibid.

Figures 14A and 14B (right)
"Garnet"
"Image of Garnet."

"Crystal Gems"
"Image of the Crystal Gems"
Figures 15A, 15B and 15C (above)

“Peridot and Lapis”

“Lapidot for All”

“Lapidot is Life”
Ibid.
Figure 16 (above)


Figure 17 (right)

@ianjq is Lars (half/) Filipino by any chance?
9:04 AM · 9 May 2017

30 Retweets 75 Likes

ianjq @ianjq · 9 May 2017
Replied to @theresivy

Yes

So we are going to talk about that Garnet cosplayer right now.

You know the one right? Yeaah this one.
What matters is context. Blackface has a racist history, and even if you’re not dressing up as a minstrel with the intent to demean blacks, there’s still a broader cultural context that makes the action unacceptable to many people.

Whitewashing is applicable to film casting (i.e. the source media themselves), not cosplay.

Cosplay however you want. Don’t let anyone dictate your life. If you like Garnet, go for it. If you like Stevonnie, go for it. If someone else has a problem with that, then that’s their problem, not yours and you are in no way obligated to concern yourself with it.

Remember, offense is never given, only taken.

While this is a valid concern (as a POC I can appreciate you asking) You’re not white washing the character by cosplaying as them (this would be like if you were deliberately making fan art of said character as white.) Cosplaying however is different, you’re showing your love for said character. And like you said, as long as you’re not trying to paint your skin darker then your are good to go. I would love to see pictures when you’re done.

Tomorrow I have to go back to a new hospital so they can monitor me for safety so I won’t do anything dumb again. But for right now I’m resting with olive. It’s been a long week. Good naps and cute pets keep me sane❤️ I love you all. And once again I’m so sorry.

I hope you fucking die

Like, seriously. This attentionwhoring is getting really fucking old. LOOK EVERYONE! A PRIVILEGED LITTLE WHITE GIRL PRETENDED SHE WAS GONNA KILL HERSELF! LET’S ALL FUCKING RUSH TO DEFEND HER LIKE SHE’S NOT AN OPPRESSOR!

Do you not know what white privilege is fucking responsible for? You’re the reason blacks are being gunned down in the streets. You’re the reason we didn’t see a black president until FUCKING 2008. And AS FUCKING SOON as PoC and LGBTQ communities are represented positively you have to come and turn each and every one of those characters into fucking racial caricatures straight out of the 1920s. Honestly, you deserve to die. Your art is fucking shit too.

“I hope you fucking die”

“Canonly fat characters”
annamagda4christ. "Leelah Alcorn’s Suicide Note [Full Text]." https://catholictrans.wordpress.com/2015/01/03/leelah-alcorns-suicide-note-full-text/.


