

My Girlfriend Olivia

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MC150 Television, Gender, and Sexuality : Lynne Joyrich

a Contested Romance

The high ceiling of my studio apartment's main room is encircled by a wide band of crown molding, painted a deep plum to stand out against the white walls. This outline visually bounds the space where the accoutrements of sleep, work, and leisure fit together harmoniously in a necessarily economical jigsaw puzzle. More specifically, it is the border that frames the proximity of my desk and my television, which face each other across only a few feet. When term paper season rolls around, this second appliance often proves an irresistible distraction from my schoolwork, and of necessity I've learned to deliver myself from temptation by camping out at neighborhood coffee shops for days at a time. The background bustle of such public spaces, and the subtle sense of community surveillance, paradoxically improve my focus, but in a wandering moment I happened to catch the eye of a fellow student and fellow dyke over the lid of my powerbook. We struck up a conversation — precisely, in my interpretation, because we recognized each other as the latter — that touched on television (an easily accessible topic, perhaps, for small talk with a stranger). She mentioned her ongoing love affair with one Olivia Benson, a detective on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, a program I'd never paid particular attention to. After this chance encounter with a personal recommendation, however, my interest was piqued, and I wondered if I would see what my intriguing new acquaintance saw in Olivia.

this is a print adaptation of an interactive online work : <<http://julielevinrusso.org/anize/Olivia>>

The institutional apparatus of cable TV obligingly facilitated my curiosity with daily reruns of *SVU* on USA, and I was indulging one evening in a desultory study of the show's potential erotics when I noticed not only Olivia, but Alexandra Cabot, the sex crime unit's foxy assistant DA. Having extensive experience with fan culture under my belt, I knew, in an instant and unshakable epiphany, that there were fan-written romances online that paired Alex and Olivia. As the episode played on, I turned to my computer (conveniently positioned right next to my television, remember), and one quick google search <<http://www.google.com/search?q=SVU+Olivia+Alex+slash>> later I was not disappointed. Alex and Olivia are, in fact, well on the road to becoming a power couple of girl-on-girl fan fiction. The availability of this dyad transformed the experience of *SVU*, for me, into a compellingly cathected site of speculation, imagination, and eros. Olivia ripened into a powerful object of desire located in the resonant interface between nightly dates with her televisual image and the alternative canon of fan productions and discussions. And this was a communicable excitement that could then ground a friendship with the mysterious stranger when I happened to run into her again a month later.

This paper is part of a story, then, that respects none of the obvious boundaries. My relationship with Olivia can't be recounted without reference to the contingencies that shape television viewership: in this case apartment architecture, a chance meeting, and the unmapped topographies of social networks and lesbian subcultures (both on- and offline). It demonstrates and depends on the ways that interpretations of (and libidinous investments in) *SVU* the show are intertextually entangled with internet fandom and with the activities of everyday life. And my work here is also conceived as a participant in this diffuse and interactive landscape, rather than as a commentary on it. How else to introduce my analysis than with an account of how Olivia

came to be my girlfriend, a tale that evinces a coy disregard for distinctions between the intellectual and the erotic, the academic and the fan, the real and the televisual.

the public eye

And I haven't yet reached the end of the tale. After I'd become intimate with Olivia by learning *SVU*'s languages of exposition and omission, and by absorbing the fan narratives that fill in its interstices with passion, angst, and sex, I was curious what other people thought of my new girlfriend. As it turns out, debate about Olivia's romantic status is far more prevalent than I anticipated. One notable thread <http://63.240.52.141/ubb/usa/html/ubb/Forum24/HTML/000155.html> on USA's online *SVU* discussion board begins with a cautious, open-ended query by **mariskafans** — “So, would anyone be too terribly offended if Olivia started dating a girl?” — that has thus far garnered over 50 responses (more than any other topic, though another about Olivia's relationship with married partner Elliot Stabler is rapidly catching up). Tellingly, the question is immediately transmuted into a dispute over Olivia's probable sexual orientation. Some fans consider only the most explicit textual citations admissible as evidence, and say so quite emphatically:

dtobe2008

She is DEFINITELY straight. There have been many episodes where she's had a date with a man and you've seen a few.

teresa985

The fact that she's dated men before on the show, and no women, leads me to believe that she's straight. Unless she flat out says: “I'm dating a woman” or something of that nature, I'm not going to believe she's a lesbian.

Others respond to this literalism by pointing out both the inherently partial nature of the picture of Olivia's love life we get from the episodes, and the possibility of a less rigidly binary sexuality:

Bekster

We don't know that she's straight — she's mentioned a significant other, what, once? She could definitely be bisexual, which would be great, she's gorgeous!

Kloie

And... just because a girl's slept with men doesn't necessarily mean she's straight. lol

This strategy is then countered with references to extratextual gossip (the avowed heterosexuality of Mariska Hargitay, who plays Olivia) and TV industry logics (the imperative to appeal to a mass audience and remain within the program's formal constraints):

svu junkie

They will never make Olivia gay 'cause her heterosexuality has already been established. If she decided to 'jump the fence' then they would have to focus on her personal life and we all know they would NEVER do this!! Heck... the show's been on 5 years and we've seen the interior of Olivia's apt. ...what...maybe once??

SVUFreak107

OMG YOU GUYS ARE CRAZY!!! Mariska/Olivia is not gay no matter what it will just screw up her image in real life and no one will like her. It will take people away from teh show not to it!!!

A recent poster objects to the idea on political grounds, citing a crucial pitfall that lurks within this sort of discussion (one which this paper itself must struggle to negotiate):

SVUAddict

I find it very frustrating when females who are strong and assertive immediately get labeled lesbians. Yes, Olivia is tough and independent, but she's also straight and I've grown tired — in my own life and in Hollywood — of seeing powerful women labeled as gay. To me, at least, it undermines the potential of straight women to possess these characteristics.

Meanwhile, what is perhaps the most fascinating response overtly describes the influence of fan production on Olivia's hypothesized sexual orientation:

Munchz Hunch

as far as olivia and being gay goes, the only reason i ever thought she WAS gay was because of all the fan fics about her BEING gay! that was what made me question her sexuality... people write fan fics from what they got off the show, and i havent seen every episode, not even CLOSE, so i was wondering after reading those fics if they [Olivia and Alex, Olivia and the new ADA Casey] truly WERE gay couples on the show. but that was put to rest after

seeing her with cassidy ["Closure"] and with that reporter dude ["The Third Guy"]... so i have had my suspicions, but they were all eventually cleared up.

In this viewer's hierarchy, fan fiction has substantial authority in the investigation of Olivia's sexuality because it is written by those with above-average expertise in reading the television text. However, verification within the program itself trumps these fan interpretations, offering a stable resolution to the issue (at least if one conveniently overlooks the option of bisexuality, as mentioned above). We return, then, to the priority of textual data in the homo/hetero calculation, with the implication that if some are arriving at the wrong answer their viewing practices must be perverse or deluded. **Spank** puts this dismissal most succinctly: "This is ridiculous... You lot look for things that aren't there."

As we see here, the question of whether Olivia could potentially be anyone's girlfriend is a particularly contested one across the SVUniverse (online *SVU* fandom). While there is clearly intense investment on both sides in definitively determining the answer, there is at the same time significant confusion about how much fluidity is allowable and about the proper source of the necessary evidence (text, audience, or metatext). Given the apparent elusiveness of the boundaries of both heterosexuality and textuality, there seems to be little hope of closing the case once and for all.

counter-attacks

Sally Forth <<http://www.sallyforth.info>> has had it up to here with these sorts of vehement and scornful reactions to the suggestion that Olivia isn't straight. Confirming that "On every *SVU*-related message board I've seen, the issue of Olivia's sexual preference comes up at some point," she gripes that "Any time I posted that Olivia might be gay or bi, well, let me say, I got my ass kicked. 'You're crazy. That scene / look / action / appearance could mean anything.

Olivia Benson is not gay. Get over it!” Her riposte is a lengthy “rave” detailing her observations and arguments concerning Olivia’s intimacies with lesbian desire through both textual analysis and broader political arguments about gay visibility in the media. Sally, like some of the posters quoted above, is not optimistic about the prospects for a girlfriend for Olivia within the economic constraints of television, writing “IMHO, TPTB [The Powers That Be] will keep Olivia as she is. No boyfriend. No girlfriend. That is the only way to avoid alienating any fans.” But she nonetheless champions the integrity of spectatorial practices, professing that “The whole point behind subtext is that people can enjoy the show however they wish, without having someone tell them that they're wrong or reading things into the show that aren't there.” Her claims are not based solely on a revaluation of fan readings, however: she backs up this call for interpretive pluralism with a humorous but meticulously impartial account of the textual “evidence” on both sides of the question “is she or isn’t she?” (making the case that those who consider the inquest over at the first glimpse of a canonical boyfriend just aren’t looking hard enough). That is, though she self-identifies as a lesbian fan, for Sally too the figure of Olivia’s lesbianism is a shifting jumble of onscreen references and absences, audience competencies and investments, TV industry strategies, and political context that is not easily brought into focus (and at the same time not easily dismissed).

A recent article <<http://www.afterellen.com/TV/svu.html>> about Olivia at AfterEllen.com further corroborates her burgeoning status as a lesbian icon. Author Angie B. engages the dispute in a more smug and less riled tone than Sally Forth, writing “While the producers might not understand why a strong androgynous female character works better without a boyfriend, we do.” In keeping with this knowing stance, she is less concerned with the primacy of textual evidence, theorizing that “What little we have seen of Olivia’s romantic life

has led us to believe she's straight, but the fact that those references are few and far between makes it easier for viewers to speculate about the character's sexuality." Instead, she reverse engineers Olivia's lesbian desire from the proof of fans' desires, to which "almost 200 stories, across at least 30 websites and mailing lists with sections devoted to the examination and expansion of the show's subtext" attest. If this many people see it, the argument goes, there must be something there to see. At the same time, this is at best an ambiguous brand of visibility, and for Angie B. too this points toward political inequalities: "It may be an indication of how far we need to go in the portrayal of lesbians and bisexual women on television that viewers get excited about a character like Benson despite no clear evidence that she's gay." Across this landscape of popular debate, then, both camps struggle with the complexity and contradictions of the project of representing or locating lesbian desire in the televisual environment.

overview

Rallied by such campaigns to defend my girlfriend's reputation, I was itching to dive into the fray. This paper is in part my own rejoinder to those within fan culture who insist on enforcing Olivia's heterosexuality. As an analysis that begins as a romance, however, it is also engaged with a more esoteric question, that of what my libidinous TV obsession is doing in an academic paper in the first place. Negotiating the contested boundary between critic and fan, that is, sometimes seems almost as treacherous as tangling with the one between straight and gay. This paper chronicles the inquests of three detectives with parallel mandates to search out the truths of desire: my beloved Olivia, always hot on the trail of New York City's sex offenders; the *SVU* fan, who watches the show vigilantly for clues to who is in Olivia's heart and in her bed; and the television scholar, who is fascinated by these epistemological conundrums, driven to investigate how we might know things about television, about audiences, and about sexuality.

I maintain that the projects of these three detectives are intertwined in multivalent networks that link knowledge, desire, and spectatorship across diverse televisual registers. Within this fundamentally intertextual architecture, the question of whether Olivia is “really” a lesbian is inextricable from broader ambiguities that infuse the uneasy relationships between texts and audiences, academics and fans, gender and consumption, hermeneutics and erotics — and thus, this paper must attempt to survey in some modest sense this vast contextual ecology.

I model the topologies of these interfaces according to Eve Sedgwick’s theory of the closet. She conceptualizes this colloquialism as a function of the primordially fraught interdependence of binary terms, whose opposition is at the same time axiomatic and “irresolvably unstable” (10). An experience of being “bayoneted through and through... by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden” and tyrannized by “an excruciating system of double binds” (70) is characteristic of this aporetic logic. While the heterosexual/homosexual dyad is of course the closet’s primary arena, Sedgwick’s thesis is that this binary is historically interwoven with any number of other essential couplings (I’ll include, in this inventory, several of TV studies’ constitutive problems: whether meaning is located inside or outside the TV text; whether the critic is the same as or different from the fan). My analysis consists, then, not of cracking the case where the aforementioned detectives remain stymied, but rather of an exploration of the specifically televisual valences that circumscribe their inquiries, especially at the hazardous junctions of epistemological endeavors, erotic investments, gender stratifications, and consumerist economics. Because the operation of the closet, by definition, dictates that it is ultimately impossible to halt the perturbing fluctuations between a concept and its converse, I can offer no incontrovertible evidence that Olivia is a lesbian, no stable hierarchy of meaning among text, audience, and metatext, no blueprint for the comfortable cohabitation of

academic and fan. What I do attempt to present here, through assessments of some of television's intellectual and social intertexts, is the more nuanced (but nonetheless forceful) claim that Olivia is the indelible fulcrum of a machine of lesbian desire that functions precisely at the volatile intersections permeating these geographies.

Textual Orientation

“any way of asking — and attempting definitively to answer — a question of sexual identity leads to its own absurdities, undoings, and erasures” (Joyrich EC 452)

The question of how one might be able to determine if television characters like Olivia are gay or straight has preoccupied academics as well as fans, and in strikingly similar terms. At the heart of the matter, as I argued in my discussion of online skirmishes above, is an intractable uncertainty about where this hypothetical orientation resides:

- in the television text itself, with evidence available in Olivia's onscreen affairs and ex-boyfriends, or in the counter-current of mysteriously cathected scenes with Alex, short hair and leather jackets;
- in the integrity of audience interpretations, the weight of viewing practices and communities that resoundingly proclaim Olivia's lesbian desirability;
- in the extratextual milieu: the conscious intentions of the show's producers for the character and the economic necessity of keeping her palatable to a broad audience, the open (some say excessively so) heterosexuality of actor Mariska Hargitay, homophobia and the dearth of “real” lesbians in the mass media.

The preeminent figure in the study of slash (fan fiction that treats same-gender pairings), Henry Jenkins, demonstrates the tangled intersections between these three levels in a reading of early debates about Kirk/Spock slash that revolved around its “plausibility.” In contention here is the proper equilibrium at the audience/text nexus — how much leeway fan writers have to “transform” the “primary text” versus how much responsibility they have to “textual fidelity.”

Fought on a muddy middle ground where “all fan writing necessarily involves an appropriation

of series characters and a reworking of program concepts” (467), this sparring will never yield an undisputed victor. Ultimately, Jenkins concludes that “The reason some fans reject K/S fiction has, in the end, less to do with the stated reason that it violates established characterization than with unstated beliefs about the nature of human sexuality that determine what types of character conduct can be viewed as plausible” (468). As Sally Forth less discreetly suggests, arguments that dismiss Olivia’s tearful goodbye to Alex in “Loss” with references to their textual boyfriends may be less about a principled insistence on the show’s canon, and more about the ways the homophobic social field structures what differently positioned viewers can and can’t see.

However, as with most academic work on slash, which falls under the audience-oriented rubric of reception studies, Jenkins seems less interested or equipped to explore what elements of the text itself open up (or close down) queer interpretive spaces. Sara Gwenllian Jones critiques this tendency in “The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters,” pointing out that “In such formulations, slash is interpreted as ‘resistant’ or ‘subversive’ because it seems deliberately to ignore or overrule clear textual messages indicating characters’ heterosexuality” (81). As such, these analyses are trapped, like the disdainful reactions to slash fiction that Jenkins evaluates, in the homophobia of “a wider cultural logic [that] dictates that heterosexuality can be assumed while homosexuality must be proved” (81). Jones asserts, rather, that slash is “an actualization of latent textual elements” (82). In another article on *Xena: Warrior Princess*, she elaborates on the theory that “heteroglossic cultural references which are easily read one way by queer viewers and quite differently by heterosexuals unfamiliar with the queer lexicon” (19) are a deliberate component of the TV industry’s market strategy. This perspective relies on a more nuanced understanding of television as a textual form (she is specifically describing “cult television

series,” but I’d maintain that similar conditions are characteristic of TV in general): “There is always a deficit between what is (or can be) shown and what the avid audience wants to see, explore, develop and know... It is this deficit between what is presented on screen and what is implied or omitted that cult television formats exploit in order to enthrall viewers” (13). In other words, the diverse pleasures fans glean from imaginatively filling in what their favorite shows formally and strategically leave out is a crucial element of marketability. As Sally Forth remarks, Olivia’s chronically boyfriend- and girlfriend-less condition is an intentional feature of *SVU* that stimulates much of the speculation and argumentation that swirls around her.

perfectly queer?

The most concerted effort to establish, within this convoluted terrain, the degree to which homosexual desire is encoded in television texts themselves (and not just in audience interpretations) is Alexander Doty’s book *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. The way that “the concept of connotation allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it” (xi) (the same strategy that Jones cites above) is a central preoccupation of his analysis, but he seems to raise more questions than he answers about the status of this queerness. On one hand, connotatively queer references can be understood as liberating for viewers and destabilizing for heteronormativity: coy narrative structures that “simultaneously suggest and deny culturally and erotically specific forms of lesbianism” (45) have, according to D.A. Miller, “the corresponding inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place” (xii). Moreover, Jones notes that “This ambiguity is itself a source of pleasure for many fans, who enjoy spotting ‘subtextual’ moments and filling in the gaps for themselves” (SLL 19). This openness necessitates, in Doty’s words, “all manner of heterosexual cover-ups that seek to contain, defuse, redefine, or render invisible what would come out as undeniable

lesbian desire in characters and queer pleasures in audiences” (53). As such, “the narrative fact of straight romance and marriage does not necessarily heterosexualize lesbian sitcoms” (57) — rather, onscreen boyfriends can function as overdetermined markers of the places where lesbian desire most threatens to erupt. On the other hand, though, “It is possible to see these sitcoms as performing certain homophobic cultural work as they construct and encourage pleasures that seek to have fundamentally lesbian narratives and enjoyments pass as straight or as ‘just friends’ homosocial” (44). That is, the other side of the coin of being encouraged to see queer desires everywhere is authorization to see them nowhere. This criticism points to a politics of visibility: Doty goes so far as to call “the closet of connotation” “oppressive” (xii) — or, as Sally Forth puts it, “invisibility is a by-product of oppression. In order to be free, we must be seen.”

This tension between optimistic and pessimistic outlooks on the presence of queerness in polysemic television texts is symptomatic of what is ultimately an ambivalence on Doty’s part about whether mass culture is “perfectly queer” after all — one that mimics the coyness of connotation that he himself critiques. At times, he states unequivocally that queerness is “inside” mass media, writing that “Queer readings... result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been *in* popular culture texts and their audiences all along” (16, my emphasis), and denigrating “straight culture[‘s]... readings of texts” as “desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture” (xii). Only sentences before this declaration in his introduction, however, he preemptively backtracks, writing that “unless the text is *about* queers, it seems to me the queerness of most mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception” (xi), and “As long as the analysis of mass culture remains dependent primarily upon texts... the queerness of and in mass culture will remain ‘essentially unsubstantial,’ as it will remain in the

twilight zone of connotation” (xii) — in other words, it is in the interpretive practices of the audience that the *real* queerness is located. “I realize that at a number of points in this book I use language suggesting [in fact, explicitly stating] that the queerness I am discussing is incontrovertibly *in the text*” (xi), he confesses, but eventually lets us in on the fact that this is a sort of strategic little white lie in service of a noble political cause: “If mass culture remains by, for, and about straight culture, it will be so through our silences, or by our continued acquiescence to such cultural paradigms as connotation, *subcultures*, *subcultural studies*, *subtexting*, the closet, and other heterosexist ploys positioning straightness as the norm” (104). That is, by vocally asserting that mass culture is inherently queer — though this is in actuality stretching the truth a bit, since heterosexism ensures that mass culture’s queerness remains ultimately insubstantial — we help bring about a future utopia in which mass culture will at last truly *be* queer. To me, this reasoning seems hopelessly garbled.

inside / outside

Let me give a more specific example of the kind of text/audience, inside/outside ambivalence I’m interrogating here, from Doty’s third chapter “I Love *Laverne and Shirley*: Lesbian Narratives, Queer Pleasures, and Television Sitcoms” — an ambivalence that, in this case, bleeds into an uncertainty about how in fact to define lesbian. Doty relies on Adrienne Rich’s concept of a “lesbian continuum” that (in her words) “embrace[s] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women,” “not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (42). Under this rubric, “The fundamentally lesbian foundations of narrative construction in these shows don’t mean that the major characters need necessarily be read as subtextual or closeted lesbians” (42), although “they also allow for, and even encourage, readings of most of the women characters as ‘really’

lesbian for viewers” (43). In other words, it is only by magically evacuating sex and sexual desire from the concept of lesbianism that Doty is able to overcome his squeamishness about claiming such programs as lesbian texts, and it is only in the interpretations of the audience that the characters are then reclaimed as “really” lesbian. The hinge shackling the dubious representability of lesbian desire to the erratic oscillation of the text/audience hierarchy is evident, here.

Doty’s analysis, I think, is haunted by an imperative that is ultimately unrealizable: the mandate to maintain the integrity of the boundaries between inside and outside, text and audience, gay and straight, even as he embarks on the project of questioning those boundaries. He defines “queerness” oppositionally as “a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight,” even as he “use[s] it to question the cultural demarcations between the queer and the straight” (xv). The contradictions of this queerness are mirrored in his convoluted attempts to locate it either inside or outside of mass culture texts — driven by the utopian notion that there might someday be an as-yet-undiscovered way for queerness to unambiguously become visible *in* these media. In the end, Doty amply demonstrates his sense of “how difficult it can be to attribute the queerness of mass culture to just one source or another” (xiii). For my part, I peddle no panacea to resolve these difficulties which, as I understand them, are inescapable as well as extremely productive. I can claim that Olivia’s lesbianism is “in” *Law & Order: SVU* (as I will do shortly) only to the degree that I (and you, my readers) are willing to abandon absolute oppositions in favor of a model where the inside and the outside interpenetrate, where the borders of the television text are permeable, compromised by intertextual relations and infiltrated by audience readings, and where the presence of lesbian desire does not preclude other identifications and erotics.

Doty's study and mine are necessarily engaged with a broader ongoing debate in the discipline of television studies (probably its central debate) about how to theorize the interfaces between text, audience, and sociopolitical context. Over several decades of interdisciplinary ferment, these have been transformed from more or less stable and opposable categories to a more postmodern assemblage where all familiar borders seem to become porous. Textual critics, for their part, have developed a model of television itself as a quintessentially postmodern media form characterized by intertextuality, self-reflexivity, seriality, and the continual play of segmentation and flow. Theorists like Fiske have similarly wanted to "dissolve" the classification of the audience too into "a multitude of differences" that "makes nonsense of any categorical boundaries" (56). Ang summarizes the state of affairs when she writes that "in our media-saturated world, media audiences can no longer be conceived as neatly demarcated categories of people, collectively set in relation to a single set of isolated texts and messages, each carrying a finite number of subject positions" (126). The apparently infinite degree of specificity called for by the progressive disintegration of established units poses a thorny analytic challenge, and Doty inaugurates his own attempts to interrogate where one might locate queerness in this matrix by recognizing this very difficulty that has been bequeathed to him: "within cultural studies, 'audience' is now always already acknowledged to be fragmented, polymorphous, contradictory, and 'nomadic,' whether in the form of individual or group subjects. Given this, it seems an almost impossible task to conduct reception studies that capture the complexity of those moments in which audiences meet mass culture texts" (1).

This is not to suggest that no distinctions or hierarchies can be recognized across these registers. Episodes of *SVU* are obviously distinguishable from fan fiction stories, for example, as

SVU's producers are from fans as producers, and each are differently interfaced with apparatuses of power. Streeter and Wahl express one version of this sort of intellectual compromise: "One can grant that viewers produce oppositional readings while still acknowledging that the viewers' power within culture is not equivalent to that of TV executives. While this unequal distribution of power over televisual culture exists, it should not be simplified or imagined as monolithic or unidirectional" (251). By the same token, not all readings are created equal, and it is important to maintain an awareness that seeing Olivia with Alex and seeing Olivia with her partner Elliot, for example, are likewise divergent positions differently inflected by power relations. The point is that debates around these questions — on the part of fans (like those in the discussion board thread above) who refer alternately to episodes, fandom, actors and industry in attempts to find evidentiary purchase, as much as on the part of academics like Doty — make it evident that such crucial boundaries stubbornly elude efforts to render them fixed and impermeable.

critic / fan

I've argued that the text/audience nexus is a pivotal site of ambivalence in television studies, one which inevitably becomes intertwined with questions of lesbian representability in the mass media. I'd now like to point toward another opposition that seems to lurk within it: that of the critic and the fan. If the fruitful challenges of audience studies push for ever greater accommodation of specificity and contingency, if the interactive relation between textuality and reception becomes the primary terrain of investigation, then the critic's own interface with television, a privileged point of access on both counts, should obviously emerge as valuable avenue of analysis. In reality, though, there is little academic work that concertedly engages the critic/fan boundary; Charlotte Brunsdon is one of the few to explicitly study this topic. In an essay that explores feminist positions in particular, she muses that "the characters who are

specific to feminist television criticism: the feminist television critic and the female viewer... and the drama of their identity and difference, seem one of the most interesting productions of feminist television criticism” (114). According to her taxonomy, the most common geometry for the correlation between these two figures is “profoundly ambivalent” (118), and one often gets the sense that “It is almost as if the researcher must prove herself not too competent within the sphere of popular culture to retain credibility within the sphere of analysis” (119). This tendency perhaps reflects a predictable anxiety about violating academic disciplinary traditions that insist on the distance between the subject and the object of study, and between the intellectual and the popular.

Brunsdon does note that the influential feminist principle ‘the personal is political’ (and, we might say, academic as well) has contributed to the validation of an autobiographical turn in some scholarship (120; Joyrich RR 13-14), but I find that there are still huge hurdles to be overcome in developing methodologies to rigorously and productively acknowledge in intellectual work the rather obvious proposition that the television critic and the television fan are more often than not one and the same. Incidentally, in defining her typology of criticism, Brunsdon shifts her attention from her original characters the “feminist television critic” and “female viewer” to “feminist” and “woman” more broadly, so there is in the end little examination here of the relationship between the former. While I am unprepared to offer a complete cartography for navigating what admittedly remains a very treacherous terrain, I am committed to placing my decidedly subjective investments in my intellectual object at the center of my analysis in this paper. Not least because enforced delicacy about fannish pleasures can only further cloud the tremendous conundrums that structure our efforts to model

text/audience/metatext relations by sidestepping the most immediate encounter with these interactions — that is, one's own.

knowing television

Joyrich references the insistence of this connection explicitly, writing that “current debates over the text and audience have made the intellectual's relationship to television a point of contention, thus demanding that critics place themselves in regard to their objects of study” (RR 14). That is to say, despite my assessment above, certainly television studies has tentatively ventured further into the borderlands between critic and fan (along with so many others) than most other academic disciplines. Doty, for one, often articulates his own viewing position as a “feminine gay man” in his book (e.g. 43). The fact that TV studies even begins to wrestle with this precarious issue attests to the way television itself continually puts it forward. In Joyrich's experience,

what had started off as two separate proceedings — on the one hand, an intellectual concern with critical and cultural theory, and on the other, my own television viewing — came to seem more and more intertwined. To some degree, this is symptomatic of the ‘nature’ of U.S. commercial television, whose commodified time flow and institutionalized textual structure (perpetual and continuous yet segmented and ‘interruptible’) encourage a spillage from TV to the texts of ‘daily life’ (RR 14)

While this statement outlines one manner in which the boundary transgressions of TV conspire to compromise the critic/fan boundary in TV studies as well, Amelie Hastie suggests that certain epistemological affinities between the logics at these multiple levels may also contribute to this effect— hence, we move back toward the figure of the detective.

In “The Epistemological Stakes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” Hastie calls attention to the “inherent overlap between consumerist and epistemological economies present both in television itself and in television criticism” (29). She notes that *Buffy* explicitly thematizes the search for

knowledge by including research, historical information, and “watching” as characteristic plot points. By absorbing this focus, fans “are trained in epistemological viewing practices” (19), indoctrinated into “a desire for and production of knowledge” (16) and a “historical consciousness” that works against “the ephemeral nature of television itself” (2) (e.g. its “liveness” or present tense, an effect of ongoing episodic series; its resistance to archivability). In this interpretation, “Viewing is thus a process in which one comes to know... this epistemological process is explicitly formed through a relation to television itself” (22). Show tie-ins (whether in the form of commercial merchandise or fan productions), then, capitalize on viewership’s coupling of desire and pleasure with the project of investigation to promote a realm of supplementary texts that drive and are driven by TV as a consumerist medium. At the same time, “This production of a knowing fan and an investment in knowledge — by both the series and its ancillary texts — naturally links *Buffy* to the work of the critic” (24). If, in the consumer logics of television itself, the desire to watch is linked with the desire to know, than it’s also true that “Television criticism depends upon consumption... the [academic] ‘I’ is also the ‘she’ who watches this series with some pleasure: the pleasure derived from the text itself, the pleasure derived from criticism” (25). In other words, Hastie’s analysis supplies an invaluable framework for my own by theorizing the practices of onscreen, audience, and intellectual detectives as congruent and interdependent, shaped by corresponding investments in epistemology and consumption as interlocking modes of engagement.

skeletons in the closet

“If Olivia is gay, then she's a closet case.” (Sally Forth)

While Hastie seems to suggest that there are libidinous aspects of consumption, Joyrich’s article “Epistemology of the Console” offers a more comprehensive model of how epistemology

and consumption are also fundamentally intertwined with sexuality in the televisual sphere. Her premise is that “U.S. television both impedes and constructs, exposes and buries, a particular knowledge of sexuality” (440) as one of its structuring projects, to the point that “the closet becomes an implicit TV form” (450). In Epistemology of the Closet, which furnishes the theoretical framework for Joyrich’s argument, Eve Sedgwick investigates how, around the turn of the 20th century, the homo/hetero binary was rather remarkably transformed into the privileged, obligatory taxonomy for classifying all persons and all permutations of sexuality. Not only did this discourse manage crisis in the realm of sexual demarcation, it was also entangled with an array of other constitutively modern predicaments, such that “a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequently and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of the homosocial/homosexual definition” (72) — among them knowledge/ignorance, public/private, inside/outside, and masculine/feminine. Because “the structuring of same sex bonds [is] a site of intensive regulation that intersects virtually every issue of power and gender” (2-3), the borders of heterosexuality and homosexuality are incessantly policed (for their own sake and for the sake of the other fraught domains they intersect with), but they can never be definitively stabilized. The closet is the figure for this profoundly contradictory organizing principle, not only of sexual identity, but of all oscillations of secrecy and disclosure that are primordially filtered through the “one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy” (73). The exasperating and oppressive paradoxes of the closet, wherein that which is unknowable, unspeakable, and invisible is at the same time relentlessly studied, discussed, and represented (and vice versa), are emblematic of “the cumulative incoherence of modern ways of conceptualizing same-sex desire and, hence, gay identity; an incoherence that answers, too, to the incoherence with which

heterosexual desire and identity are conceptualized” (82). As Joyrich sums up the quandary: “if, as Sedgwick compellingly argues, sexuality is inextricable from what counts as knowledge in our culture, then it is impossible simply to define a program of knowing sexuality” (459).

Applying this theory to television specifically, Joyrich asserts that the swinging of the closet door (445) is an aporia at the heart of televisual representation, perforated as it is with the kinds of overlapping ideological minefields that Sedgwick identifies:

Homosexuality — *the* mark of diacritical sexual difference in our society — [is] both an effect of and an obstacle to television’s confessional, familial, and consumer regime, the sexuality produced precisely *as* obstacle, necessarily inside and outside the televisual domain... With sexual disclosure seemingly compulsory yet forbidden, demanded yet contained, television constructs illicit sexualities ambivalently as both known and unknown (449)

Like Doty, Jones, and indeed, Sally Forth, Joyrich observes that the media have managed homosexual desire through deliberate ambiguity, with contradictory consequences: “Held ‘definitionally in suspense’ through connotation, homosexuality became impossible either to confirm or to disprove, with the unsettling (or heartening) effect that heterosexuality itself could no longer be absolutely guaranteed... this epistemic/erotic nexus has continued to construct homosexuality as both desired and disavowed” (442). This strategy is a key permutation of “the [TV] industry’s attempts to define sexuality as product while retaining its simultaneous anxiety around sexuality as practice” (451), an economic bargain often facilitated by “encourag[ing] an epistemology (and erotics) of ‘knowing viewers’” (453) (or, in my terms, trained detectives). But, while Doty and Sally affiliate with a politics of visibility, Joyrich cautions that “in formulating a politics of representation, we need not — indeed, should not — simply ask for more... the explicit revelation of sexuality on commercial television need not explode the logic of the closet” (467). Doty himself notes that the appearance of overtly lesbian characters on TV shows often serves to localize and thus contain what are otherwise more pervasive and

destabilizing homoerotic undercurrents (43). What Joyrich's critical application of the architecture of the closet to television helps us to understand is that, when it comes to gays on TV, there can never be any uncorrupted movement from invisibility to visibility (just as "coming out" doesn't resolve the double binds of the closet for non-fictional gay people [Sedgwick 68]). The problems of representing homosexual desire inhere in the ceaseless oscillation between visible and invisible, inside the closet and outside on the streets (or screen) that is constitutive of (post)modern culture itself.

conclusions

While Hastie explores the intimacies of consumption with televisual epistemology, Joyrich places it in a similarly inextricable relationship with gay media representation. She contends that "the logic of the commodity is already related to the logic of the closet. In other words, there is no pure space of gay self-disclosure uncontaminated by relations of consumerism and commodification, just as there is no pure space of consumerism uncontaminated by what we might see as closet relations" (462). If sexuality, knowledge, and TV's texts and economics are mutually imprisoned in the same insatiable closet, I hope it is not too frivolous to suggest that there may be something of this logic too in the procedures of television studies as I outlined them above. That is, television scholars like Doty grapple with the precarious question of whether meaning is located inside or outside the text, in representation or interpretation, and even as this programmatic binary is extensively rejected in favor of more complex, interactive models, it seems effectively impossible to dispense with these terms completely. Their vacillation irresolvably haunts criticism like the swinging of the closet door, perhaps (as Sedgwick puts it, "the simple vesting of some alternative metaphor has never, either, been a true possibility" [72]). Moreover, our pleasure in television is the TV critic's love that dare not speak its name, our

version of the open secret. It is a gratification that seems peculiarly unrepresentable in spite of its obviousness: a residual academic stigma attached to the popular may keep it discreetly under wraps, or it may stubbornly continue to disappear even when acknowledged if methodological deficits make it difficult to incorporate. So, the study of television characters who are “closeted” has subtly self-reflexive resonances at the level of analysis itself.

In this paper, these parallels are not so subtle. Through this lengthy theoretical excursus, I am making the argument that — given a) television’s fundamental intertextuality, its interpenetration with its social context, with ancillary texts, with the competencies and orientations of its audience and b) the encompassing interdependence of epistemological, consumerist, and sexual discourses, perhaps particularly in the case of television — the desires and procedures of my three detectives (the character, the fan, and the critic) mirror and shape each other in their search for sexual knowledge. Each is enabled and constrained by closet formations wherein binary terms continually reassert their authority in spite of their manifest instability and contradictions. And under these unruly conditions, my personal erotic investments as the fan in this story are unavoidably interfaced with my intellectual ones as the critic, though this relation remains ensnared in the same profoundly shifting architecture. Having constructed, I hope, a framework that effectively debunks any effort to resolve “lesbian” or “text” into bounded categories in the typical sense, I’d now like to go on to assert that Olivia’s lesbianism is nevertheless textual, in ways that are premised particularly on this understanding of intertextual and epistemological operations.

Detecting Desire

In her foregoing exploration of television's closet logics, Joyrich observes that "the institutional organization of U.S. broadcasting situates television precisely on the precarious border of public and private, 'inside' and 'outside.' Here it constructs knowledges identified as both secret (domestically received) and shared (defined as part of a collective national culture)" (445). In other words, television's textual contortions around homosexuality are not only akin to those of the culture at large (in Sedgwick's terms), but also interlaced with them — and related binary hazards. The premise of my argument about *Law & Order: SVU* is that, in order to fully appreciate the mobilization of lesbian desire in this text, we must recognize that television (like lesbianism) is intermingled with a perilous context of diverse crises and anxieties. If, as I discussed above, television is known for destabilizing familiar boundaries, this is in part because it came of age (and has continued to develop) as the primary mass medium while the surrounding culture was in a process of profound transformation.

In an article about television as "The Suburban Home Companion" in the 1950's, Lynn Spigel maintains that, during an era when the frontiers of (the domestic) inside and (the economic) outside were being renegotiated, "Television was caught in a contradictory movement between private and public worlds, and it often became a rhetorical figure for that contradiction" (213) — the home's "antiseptic" "window on the world" but also a breach in its walls that lets social contagions in. Such ambivalence had gendered ramifications, as television "became a central trope for the crisis of masculinity in post-war culture" (229). Though "this fear of feminization has characterized the debates on mass culture since the nineteenth century" (229-30), of particular concern in this case was the fantasy that "television's blurring of private and public space became a powerful tool in the hands of housewives who could use the technology to

invert the sexist hierarchies at the heart of the separation of spheres” (231). The fact that this nightmare included “ways for women to control their husbands’ sexual desires through television” (231) highlights the element of erotic deviance in these transgressions.

The volatile public/private nexus is at the heart of television’s economic deployment as much as of its discursive features. “The contemporary practices of domesticity, of the ‘home,’” Streeter and Wahl write, “are an integral part of the constitution of television” (244) — and, indeed, vice versa. Crucially, these mutual influences especially intersect with contested gender relations — in ways that are not entirely new:

The idea of the living room as the center of leisure in the modern TV household is part of a broader gendered discursive practice: the discourse of the ‘consumer’... As others have observed, the industry’s view of consumers is both analogous and historically linked to Western patriarchy’s view of women. Assumptions about domestic space, and its function within a capitalist economy, are built on the gendered roles of married couples (249)

That is, the ideological and economic stability of consumer capitalism, from its inception, depended upon the segregation of public and private domains that were also always constructed as masculine and feminine, but Streeter and Wahl hold that this divide was never coherent: “in spite of all the efforts to the contrary, women became involved in the market because of the simple necessity of purchasing goods to maintain a household... This hidden economic influence hints at the fallacy of the ‘separate spheres’ theory, of the idea of a private space disengaged from the marketplace” (250-1). Bathrick traces this paradox toward the birth of television, affirming that “Above all, [the 19th century True Woman] was to preserve her home as a refuge from the marketplace, while at the same time she would grow increasingly dependent on that marketplace for its goods and services... By the 1950s the arrival of television insured an almost complete ‘occupation’ of the private by the public” (100). So, an already rich ambivalence about

the literal and symbolic role of women in the economy, particularly in relation to the consumption of mass culture, took on new intensities when television entered the picture.

women at work

These social circumstances also inflect TV's epistemological landscapes. Streeter and Wahl point out that the mutual constitution of gendered spheres and consumer economics is inseparable from the same sorts of analytic uncertainties about viewers that plague television studies: "The social fact and assumption of viewing in the domestic space... is one of the principle ways that the industry solves what Gitlin calls 'the problem of knowing,' that is, the difficulty of organizing centralized program production given an invisible and diverse broadcast audience" (248). As for the critics themselves, Joyrich notes that "disputes over the gendered subject — *women's* place in the public and private spheres — have been complemented by similar disputes over the subject of reception — *women's* place within the discourses of and about television" (RR 5). If, as Joyrich maintains, "television as it is currently organized gears its specific textuality and viewer/text engagement toward a goal quite consonant with capitalist patriarchy — the encouragement of consumption," the figure of women as the "primary consumer[s] in our society" (RR 40) is necessarily refracted through all facets of the project of televisual representation and inquiry.

As Bathrick observes, "the new [post-war] economic reality that... middle-class women, wives and mothers were entering the labour force as never before" (100) was an especially fraught node in these gendered networks, and the professional woman became a privileged emblem of the anxieties stimulated around the shifting public/private border. According to Streeter and Wahl's introduction to the topic:

The category of the 'working woman' gets its meaning, not straight from life, but by way of *other* categorizations and their contradictions... 'working women' are not women who work, but women who work in a way that takes them across a perceived social boundary that violates certain received social expectations... relating to certain felt tensions and struggles over the role of women within social life; if there is a connection between the political-economic and aesthetic dimensions of television, it is not because the former mechanically imprints itself on the latter, but in terms of those tensions and struggles. (243)

That is, as television is thoroughly entangled with the gendered contradictions and transgressions that crisscross public and private realms, the similarly laden figure of the working woman is necessarily interwoven with the televisual terrain. The professional woman, in literal terms, exploded onto the television scene with the hugely popular *Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1970 (after the actual transformation of women's participation in the workforce had been underway for more than two decades, as Bathrick points out). This and other initial portrayals (Rabinovitz identifies ten "feminist sitcoms" before 1985 [146]) were predictably ambivalent, manifesting, as Bathrick puts it, "the historical and ideological mandate for keeping the familial intact" (105) via "another, albeit more 'responsive', commitment to family values" (103) displaced onto the "workplace family." At the same time, representing the domestic (or, indeed, erotic) concerns proper to femininity within the public professional setting was often an insurmountably thorny proposition: a 1971 article "asserts that working women portrayed on TV are never granted private lives and that mothers are denied any relationship to the workplace" (102). Lentz argues that, additionally, typical discourses around these programs translated feminist struggles against such double binds into "television's struggle for legitimation" (50), a move that "relies simultaneously upon freeing television from its femininity and conferring new value on that femininity" (51). This strategic maneuvering demonstrates, again, that the uncertainties posed by the changing status of women, and by the disruptive working woman in particular, are bound up with uneasiness around television itself that it must navigate and contain. Finally, Lauren

Rabinovitz recognizes that “Network programming executives initially became interested in ‘feminist programming’ in the early 1970s because it was good business,” given “an important national shift in audience” (145) toward the young female professional as the new privileged consumer. In this metatextual sense, too, television’s position *vis à vis* women’s roles is inextricable from the complicated relations of capitalism and working girls.

lesbian specters

Inhabiting the borderlands of several critical oppositions (e.g. public/private, masculine/feminine), these negotiations inevitably intersect with erotic peril and discipline (as Sedgwick suggests they must). The phantasmatic association of lesbian deviance with female independence and liberation predates both television and the concurrent socioeconomic transformations that brought the majority of women into the workplace in the decades after WWII. In the television age, the specter of transgressive same-sex desire continues to haunt profoundly conflicted portrayals of the working woman. Sasha Torres remarks on “the televisual tendency to use feminism and lesbianism as stand-ins for each other” (177) across the industry’s various attempts to capitalize on feminism’s potential demographic appeal. She argues that this deployment performed contradictory functions, vacillating between representing the lesbian character (beginning with Marilyn McGrath on the hospital drama *HeartBeat*) as the “privileged signifier of feminism” and thus *like* other women, and as fundamentally *different* from other women to “ease the ideological threat... by localizing the homosexuality which might otherwise pervade these homosocial spaces” (179). In other words, the architecture of the closet reasserts itself over the figure of the feminist or professional woman as the impulse to simultaneously incorporate and displace her violation of the culture’s constitutive boundaries.

In a study of the politics of “feminist sitcoms” across several decades, Rabinovitz too claims

that “women desiring women [is] the repressed aspect of female friendship throughout these programs” (151). In the case of Murphy Brown in the early 1990s, the ambivalence of connotation is again apparent as the character’s “assertiveness, independence, brassiness, and ‘smart mouth,’ as well as her tailored and even sometimes androgynous wardrobe, may suggest her capacity as a lesbian or figure for lesbian identification while references to her active, ongoing heterosexual life and desire undercut such signifiers” (160). I’d like to point out that this is strikingly similar to how lesbian-oriented fans describe Olivia, and the oscillation between the eruption and erasure of lesbian desire turning on her in *SVU*. The AfterEllen.com article observes that Olivia is

one of the few characters on TV to exhibit what are often considered to be dyke characteristics — with short hair, a leather jacket, and a gun at her hip, Olivia sits with legs apart, commanding the space around her. She is the protector of the victims who come through her department, a strong woman in a profession filled with men, and often physically or verbally dominates “perps.” Her uniform includes t-shirts, sweaters, slacks and sensible shoes — no heels, no frills, and little jewelry except for what appears to be a man’s watch.

Notably, these qualities (like Murphy’s) have, in and of themselves, nothing to do with sex between women. What they do imply is these characters’ contravention of the bounds of properly feminine aesthetics and activities, the challenge to stable hierarchies of gender that inheres in their role as successful, independent professionals. Because Sedgwick’s theory of the closet reveals that the homo/hetero frontier is inextricable from other foundational binaries, because television itself and the pleasure we take in it as consumers are deeply implicated in cultural changes that generate ever-intensifying anxieties about such divisions, the apparition of lesbian desire (both dangerous and exciting) prowls the televisual realm. This is the first sense in which I claim that Olivia’s lesbianism is indelibly “in” the television text, rooted in the most elemental interactivities constraining the representation of women on television, in a way that no amount of onscreen boyfriends could ever contain or erase.

special victims

rape is “a crime ideally suited to television” (quoted in Cuklanz 16)

I am transposing Olivia into a genealogy of feminist sitcoms featuring professional women, but it is equally significant that her character is located within a distinct textual milieu: the cop/detective program — a form that Fiske describes as “the primary masculine television genre” (Cuklanz 18). Since, as Fiske puts it, “‘most masculine texts’ eliminate ‘the most significant cultural producers of the masculine identity — women, work, and marriage’” (Cuklanz 19), it follows that the portrayal of women and private (i.e. feminine) concerns like romance is especially conflicted here. Lisa Cuklanz identifies an economically-motivated shift in the textual orientation of detective shows, writing that “In the 1980s the genre became more and more similar to the soap opera, with the aim of attracting a broad-based, mixed-gender audience... the form and content of crime dramas became increasingly feminized” (24) — but such hybridization may exacerbate rather than alleviate the tensions plaguing this televisual version of separate spheres.

In her book Rape on Prime Time, Cuklanz provides the interesting statistic that, several high-profile sitcom episodes aside, crime shows accounted for approximately 87% of rape-themed narratives on prime time TV between 1976 and 1990 (out of about 100 — that’s if you include *L.A. Law*’s 9) (23). In “Epistemology of the Console,” Joyrich also suggests (less empirically) that there may be a privileged affinity between detective programs and deviant erotics. She argues that a common mode of representing homosexuality on television is via “a logic of detection and discovery — in which hints of sexuality are offered as clues to be traced,” which is particularly evident in “the hermeneutic of suspicion found in several cop/detective shows that are characterized by their direct enactment of the drive to know” (452). In her words,

“the very narrative of the detective program incites a desire to solve its enigmas, be these criminal or sexual — or frequently... a conflation of both” (453). Thus, the imminence of investigating sex and the project of knowledge more broadly is operating here at full capacity.

I'd like to propose, therefore, that the epistemological engagement with sexual deviance and violence, at its most extreme in TV's abundant crime plots thematizing rape, is connected to the more diffuse boundary transgressions I discussed above as constitutive of the detective genre (and of television itself). In an article on rape in the media, Sarah Projansky notes that “rape narratives historically often linked rape to women's independence” (97), and that a typical device was “a woman [who] faces rape because of her desire to access her equal right to a masculine career” (102). That is, the same figure — the empowered professional woman — tends to be, on television, both the fulcrum of lesbian anxieties and the target of sexual violence. Depictions of rape (sexual violence) and homosexual desire (sexual deviance), women's crossings between the home and the workplace, and televisual havoc with the gendered perimeters of public and private are discourses that are all intimate with each other. Moreover, Projansky claims that the “paradox of discursively *increasing* (and potentially eliciting pleasure in) the very thing a text is working against” (96) is active in the media's treatments of rape, wherein a violent erotic is represented with the explicit purpose of “educating” viewers about it as a social evil, but functions simultaneously as a titillating incitement to watch. Rape as a subject of television, then, is situated at the charged nexus of sexuality, gender, knowledge, and economics, where it is often the most treacherous aspects of these highly contested domains that are the most valuable commodities. I locate the second sense in which I claim that Olivia *is* a lesbian in the unavoidable homoerotic reverberations of the sex detective's epistemological project and television's social and commercial project, across the various levels of an intertextual field.

investigating *SVU*

Which brings me, finally, to *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, a program that is unique in making manifest this underlying connection between the most masculine genre and the most private form of violence by dealing almost exclusively with “sexually-based offenses.” Resonances between its stated epistemological mandate to search out the truths of criminal sexuality and a televisually-inflected vigilance around more subterranean investments in family and heteronormativity are typical of *SVU*, and I’d like to illustrate some of these structuring principles through a detailed discussion of a single episode. This episode, “Sacrifice” (3.7/#50), which involves a case of gay *misidentification*, is not classified as one of *SVU*’s “handful of gay-related episodes” by AfterEllen.com. And, as author Angie B. points out, “it seems odd that in five seasons, no lesbian or bisexual women have been featured characters” — a telling absence in a series that has had to treat an imaginative smorgasbord of perversions in order to fill, to date, more than 100 episodes. I have argued that lesbian desire has an especially troubled relationship to shows that feature professional women, and I’d suggest that this apparent reluctance to include it in the range of sexual themes that *SVU* mediates for the television public is symptomatic of the hazardous undertow of lesbian desire pulling at the show already, which it would be risky for the program to scrutinize too closely. If “Sacrifice” is necessarily not an officially lesbian text, then, nor is it one of the episodes that make frequent appearances in fan dialogue about onscreen “subtext” between Olivia and Alex (first and foremost, “Loss”). In choosing “Sacrifice” as my example, in other words, I’m examining an episode that has only a tangential connection to this paper’s topic of Olivia as lesbian object and subject. I’m interested in analyzing how the logics of *SVU* overall set up epistemological frameworks that put forward this possibility, even when it doesn’t surface in obvious ways. “Sacrifice” demonstrates how homosexuality tends to

alternately emerge and disappear in conjunction with violence, family crisis, consumerism and spectacle, and epistemological uncertainty more generally.

“Sacrifice” opens with what we might imagine is a stereotypical scene from gay life: a crowd of men loitering outside a bar, as two negotiate their first date. Just as they are making plans to continue the evening, gunshots ring out, and the incipient romance is disrupted. This sort of association of transgressive (in this case, homosexual) desire with violence is obviously constitutive of *SVU* as a show about sex crimes. When the shots go off, one of the men pulls his gun and dashes away — he’s a cop, we are to assume, so personal life is also interrupted by the professional, here.

Next, this gay officer (called Steve) meets up with Olivia and her partner Elliot at the hospital where the unconscious gunshot victim was taken. Their conversation establishes, first of all, the detectives’ fluency with the city’s licentious gay subculture, perhaps a necessary part of their purview as “panty police” (or, one might speculate, a particular competency of Olivia’s, as she does most of the talking). Steve informs them he believes he spotted the victim in “Puffy’s” (near the scene of the crime), and Olivia responds with surprise, “Inside the bar?” “I was on a date,” Steve confesses, clarifying what he was doing in what she evidently knows to be a gay establishment, and activating the significance of inside vs. outside so characteristic of the closet. Elliot’s main role is to ask, after they’ve gotten the facts out of the way, if Steve “wants a little discretion on this,” making clear the intersection of this incident with the figures of the homophobic police department and the closeted gay cop (where we can’t help wondering about Olivia).

The initial phase of their investigation reveals several assumptions typical of the hermeneutics of *SVU*’s sex detectives. First, the unit is involved because “copious fluids” were

found (in the victim), raising the suspicion of gang rape — as if any non-normative sexual behavior (in this case, having multiple partners) must be the result of violence. Second, their reading of the victim as gay, which you'll recall is based solely on the location of the crime (as they're presuming the sex with men was non-consensual), is unshaken when they note he's wearing a wedding ring. "If he's in a committed relationship," Elliot muses, to which Olivia replies derisively, "He was in a meat market bar. Let's hope his partner's more committed than he is" — they rely here on stereotypical models of homosexual partnerships (both positive and negative) to interpret the evidence. Third, they immediately verify that the victim has no prior arrests for solicitation (i.e. prostitution), cluing us in to an implicit connection between (homo)sexual criminality and commercialism. Fourth, Detective Munch's opinion is that "Good money's on a hate crime. Perps are usually hetero or closeted and in denial," referencing an awareness of the very real violence that can be provoked by the closet's oppressive architecture. And most importantly, what the discussion of the facts of the case among the SVU team exhibits is that their procedures for investigating sex consist in large part of applying imagination to the evidence to tell speculative stories that fit the crime (e.g. Elliot's: "maybe he was cheating, went out, picked up the wrong guys in the meat market"). One might say that the pleasure of being a detective (particularly for those detectives playing along in the audience) lies in this creative exercise of conjecture.

the family business

The problem with SVU's hypothetical account of the crime, in this instance, is that the victim won't accommodate his tale to theirs. When Olivia and Elliot finally catch up with the elusive Wesley at his apartment he is uncooperative, and denies he was raped. The detectives are incredulously confronting him with the "evidence" when his wife and daughter walk in. In this

instant juxtaposition of a narrative of gay violence with a portrait of nuclear normativity, the detectives' (and the audience's) interpretation is thrown into fatal disarray (in the sort of entertaining plot twist that advances virtually every episode of *SVU*). This is the first transposition of the episode, from a sordid saga of homosexual, subcultural sex and violence to a drama of an ordinary family threatened — and I would argue that the combination is not coincidental. The connection is emphasized by an initial period of confusion when it seems that Wesley's family might be endangered precisely by his gay desires. When the detectives question him back at the station, there's this exchange:

Wesley: "No one raped me."

Elliot: "Then how do you explain the semen inside of you — was it consensual?"

Wesley: "I'm married, I've got a kid."

Olivia: "Look, lots of people hit for both teams. Now either you were forced, or you weren't."

Wesley: "OK, I'm bisexual. Are we done?"

All the unmappable territories of marital (in)fidelity, sexual orientation, the closet, the sexual body, and consent converge here in a hermeneutic sinkhole that renders rape stubbornly indefinable in the binary terms that Olivia insists should characterize it. In her potent line, retaining the absolute opposition between forced and consensual sex dictates abandoning the one segregating desire into homo and hetero (not an insignificant maneuver given that this is our culture's structuring premise, as Sedgwick conceives it). In evidence also is the potential boomerang effect of the vague "lots of people": when Olivia is the one who defends transgressive erotics (as she often is, the foil to her more conservative partner), there's always the risk that her sympathy will be viewed as a subtle suggestion about her own sexuality. Olivia presses Wesley for the "truth" with benevolent frustration that he won't allow *SVU* to "help" him, demonstrating an axiom of *SVU*'s investigative logics (and those of the culture at large, perhaps): people — and television characters — don't often willingly offer up the verities of

their desire; this knowledge can only be produced through vigilant observation and inquest. So, at this point in “Sacrifice,” the figure of a family in crisis momentarily overlaps with the concurrent difficulties of delineating both desire (which appears mystifyingly bisexual rather than stably homosexual) and violence — and hence also with the fissures in the supposedly rock solid reality of rape itself, the show’s ostensible *raison d’être* (as Olivia expresses their dilemma: “without a complaining witness [the rape] doesn’t exist”).

Much of this murkiness is conveniently cleared up, though, when there’s a break in the case: it turns out Wesley is a gay porn star. In what I’m identifying as the episode’s second transposition, another suspect confirms that their “victim” is “not gay... Wesley’s strictly gay for pay at 1500 bucks a bang,” and any exploration of homosexual (or even bisexual) desire, whether violent or consensual, quite effectively vanishes from the episode as the detectives wholeheartedly adopt this rather simplistic explanation. Thus, homosexuality as the episode’s framing perversion is displaced (quite baldly, I’d say) onto the commercialization and spectacularization of sexuality, the moral debate transferred from the peccadilloes of (married, closeted) homosexuals to those of pornographers. Whether Wesley is a closeted homo or a closeted porn star, however, the effects of the closet are still in force. The detectives aren’t surprised that Wesley refused to come clean, and Tutuola states the obvious: “a straight guy wouldn’t want the world to know he’s doing gay porn.” The SVU team’s own ambivalence about pornographic eroticism easily matches their tribulations policing homosexual desire. In a subsequent interview, Elliot tetchily reminds Wesley that “Pornography isn’t illegal. Making it isn’t illegal” (establishing that, in this episode of *SVU*, there isn’t any bona fide sex crime involved), but Wesley highlights the pique in his manner over the reassurance in his words when he responds, “I see the way you’re looking at me. I’m scum because I make money having sex.”

Later, Alex goes to court to remove Wesley's daughter from her parents, on the grounds that "pornography is a form of legal prostitution. The minor's physical, mental, and emotional welfare was corrupted... [by] exposing her to an environment of wanton sexual activity." These attitudes are representative of how *SVU*'s narrative language is shaped by imperatives of normative containment as much as by the legal enforcement of sexuality, whether the deviance in question is homosexuality or another eminently substitutable threat to the conventional family.

the boob tube

The pivotal revelation of Wesley's reluctant stardom comes out simultaneously in two interviews that are intercut with each other as SVU personnel watch through one-way mirrors. Shooting scenes through windows or showing people watching through windows, particularly during interrogations at the station, is a signature visual device of *SVU*. One that could be interpreted as a self-reflexive commentary on television itself ("Your Window on the World"): an allusion to the privileged point of view of the audience, and to the affinity of this position with the diegetic detective work. The new pornography angle is, of course, even more insistently self-reflexive (as are all *SVU* episodes that feature a videotape of a sex crime). When Olivia expresses incredulity about the suspect's gay porn story, he volunteers "I could screen the film for you if you'd like." The detectives don't respond, but the unfulfilled promise of explicit images hovers over the rest of the episode, functioning both to differentiate *SVU*'s text from porn (educating us about the difference between good sex TV and bad sex TV), and simultaneously to destabilize this very distinction — as *SVU* is obviously portraying porn (albeit with some delicacy) even as it condemns it. Elliot and Olivia drop in on a porn set, where the camera tracks tightly behind them as they stride through a labyrinthine corridor from the respectable outer office into the sordid interior, passing by the video equipment and crew before they stop short,

their backs framing a tableau of Wesley's wife Jaina, in a tawdry maid's outfit, kneeling on the floor between two buff, shirtless men — a titillating picture indeed. On their second visit, the shots track across the literal border between realist illusion and televisual apparatus, crossing walls sporting lifelike domestic interiors on one side and scaffolding, machinery, and lounging talent on the other. The flick's director goads Olivia by asking her, "You ever thought about doing a movie? You look like you'd be a real natural" — calling attention, perhaps, to her actual existence onscreen in a show about sex. In summary, then, "Sacrifice" serves as an example of the ways *SVU*'s language of investigation mediates the normative, as well as criminal, boundaries of sexual acts and desires, mobilizing critical ambivalences at the multivalent intersections of (homo)sexuality and perversion, family and eroticism, consent and violence, sex and consumerism, private acts and public performance, truth and simulation, revelation and concealment — a diagetic network of structuring ambiguities that reverberates intertextually and metatextually as well.

knowing fans

After the first time [Alex] wondered whether people could tell. She had gay friends who would play "lesbian/straight?" over coffee as if there were secret signs, visible only to women in the know. And maybe there was something in that. She wondered if she exhibited such signs...

When Olivia is near she feels the whole world watching... "We should be more careful," she says, watching the squad room for signs of interest. "We shouldn't... not where everyone can see us"... sometimes she wonders if they know already. There's not much that escapes a detective in sex crimes. (from "Objects in the Mirror" by CGB)

Most importantly, my discussion of "Sacrifice" outlines the hermeneutic strategies that are the currency of *SVU*'s onscreen detectives but also of the competencies of its audience. That is, by relentlessly thematizing the investigation of desire through watching for signs, searching for clues, interrogating recalcitrant suspects, and fabricating plausible stories to fit the evidence, *SVU* is training its viewers to do the same. I've argued that the suggestion of Olivia's lesbianism

is insistently activated by the gendered logics of televisual representation overall, and their interpenetration with the precarious homo/hetero binary. And I've argued that *SVU* as a text demonstrates this topography in its narratives, which symptomatically interweave the quest for truth and justice with the search for the elusive frontier where normal sexuality and relationships cross into deviance, perversion, and violence, where private acts and desires cross into the public discourse of crime and the televisual spectacularization and commodification of sex.

Additionally, I'm claiming here that *SVU* actively invites its viewers to scrutinize these contradictory fields of overlap for the illicit specters that haunt them — its marketability depends, after all, on the pleasure of learning the ways of sex detectives. Given a series whose premise is discovering clandestine sexual transgressions, how can we not be ever-vigilant, as an audience, for even the subtlest signs and clues. This exercise expands as fans convene their own detective squads, collectively reviewing the facts and producing explanatory narratives in their own gratifying inquests.

As the debates that inaugurated this paper amply illustrate, though, these multifarious investigations of course come to divergent conclusions about *SVU*'s erotic enigmas. While television's formal configuration dictates that each of the program's diegetic mysteries is more or less solved by the end of the episode, real-life sexual hermeneutics by nature never reaches such closure. Sedgwick offers one approach to the roiling complexity of the forces that permanently defer the resolution of closet-inflected questions like 'is she or isn't she' when she observes that "Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (4). That is, remaining ignorant can be as vigorous a procedure as seeking knowledge, and, according to Sedgwick, "Such ignorance effects can be harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking enforcements — perhaps

especially around sexuality” (her germane example is “The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape”) (5). The processes involved, then, in enabling some viewers (and, one might speculate, producers, actors, etc.) to not know of Olivia’s lesbian desires are as dynamic and robust as those arrangements that I’ve maintained induce these desires to be sought out and seen. Given, also, the multiple subject positions TV always makes available (for both formal and economic reasons) by necessarily leaving all its representations (especially of sexuality) open-ended and incomplete (to varying degrees), the fact that televisual lesbianism is selectively imperceptible is no proof that it isn’t there. This differential geography of visibility is, however, a sign of the saturation of the landscapes of text, audience, and social context with the aporetic logics of the closet, provoking unpredictable oscillations within and between strata that keep these vistas in a state of perpetual excitation.

a contested romance, redux

And no one is more excited, evidently, than the communities of fans who see Olivia in an erotic relationship with Alex or other female characters (or, of course, with themselves). These interpretive networks synthesize and rework *SVU*’s onscreen languages to articulate the results of their libidinal investigations. Shaping this process is a critical awareness, first of all, of the televisual constraints circumscribing the portrayal of sexuality — particularly, I’ve emphasized, at the perilous junction of women and the workplace, and in “masculine” genres. Angie B. reiterates the widespread recognition that the generic conditions of this detective series dictate that “the show deliberately does not focus on the personal lives of its characters.” This attribute incites and justifies disproportionately intensive deductive formulas: in the rubric of one group, for example, “one drink” between characters in the diagetic realm equates to a sexual liaison, once you control for the program’s acute representational restraint <<http://www.columbia.edu/>

~ail2001/part2.htm>.

Moreover, I'd contend that many fans are also consciously engaged with the ways the more enfolding contortions of the closet manipulate the visibility of lesbian eroticism, both on- and offscreen. One fan fiction author, LostinTranslation, had this to say about the inspiration for the novella "Held Within the Beat of Your Heart" <<http://www.ralst.com/Held1.HTM>>:

SVU is a television series about crimes involving sex that rarely explores sexuality itself. Often times *SVU* traffics in stories involving extreme sexuality, but the underpinnings for such forms of sexual expression are rarely considered beyond a simple psychology that is often heavily moralized. Too often on *SVU* sexuality is understood within an uncomplicated dynamic of direct cause and effect. Of course, this is nonsense. With *Held*, I wanted to write a story about a sex crime and sexual expression, I also wanted to write a story in which the two topics would collide in unpleasant ways. I picked a horrific situation because I wanted to use such a thing as the most unlikely of backdrops for a love story. (personal correspondence)

In other words, *Lost*'s work is a response to some of the limitations, contradictions, and erasures that mark *SVU*'s texts, to the inescapable infusion of the show's lexicon with normative hierarchies of power that are often rigid and binarized. *Lost*'s project is to deliberately and interactively formulate an alternative vocabulary that reveals the intimacies that *SVU* attempts to repress between opposing terms like natural and criminal sexuality, romantic and violent erotics.

While I wouldn't claim (as I did with "Sacrifice") that "Held" is at all typical of slash fiction about Olivia, I do believe it exhibits many of the discursive principles I consider characteristic of this genre — often in an especially prominent or drastic form. "Held" recounts the aftermath of a horrific, almost unthinkable crime: Olivia and Alex have been kidnapped, and our heroine is forced by their captors to sexually violate Alex. While this assault is both an extreme instance and a patent echo of the "sexually-based offenses" *SVU* presents each week, the text emphasizes that this was one case that was "kicked under the rug as soon as possible" (pt. 1). In a striking contrast (one the characters perceive as well) to *SVU*'s customarily zealous

detective work, bloody clothes from the scene are given back to the women to be destroyed, and Tutuola “accidentally” wrecks the camera that the perps used to record their brutality (a figure for the television camera, perhaps) — these are “evidence no one wanted to process” (pt. 2). As in the series itself, it is clear that the specter of Olivia and Alex having sex exceeds the bounds of the detectives’ epistemological capabilities, and all signs that indicate this prospect must be hastily recontained.

“Held” highlights the precariousness of the boundaries of consent and perversion that *SVU* for the most part works to shore up. Alex’s determination to convince Olivia that she isn’t a rapist is a key element of the story’s plot; when Alex first asserts that she “wasn’t raped,” Olivia bitterly counters that the hospital did a rape kit (pt. 1). By turning to “standard procedure” to classify their experience, Olivia makes manifest the inadequacy of the juridical infrastructure that provides *SVU*’s discursive framework. Alex, in *Lost*’s version, has decidedly kinky tastes that were sickeningly parodied in her non-consensual submission at the hands of the kidnappers. In the course of confessing her proclivities to Olivia, they have this conversation:

“There’s one other thing, isn’t there?”

Her breath leaving her body in a panic, Alex tried a joke. “No wonder the perps confess to you.”

Olivia almost missed it. She stopped from denying their conversation was an interrogation by only a split second. Instead she responded to the assumption underneath Alex’s bantering.

“Alex, you’re not a perp.”

“Are you sure?” (pt. 4)

That is, any hint of sexual deviance, even on the windward side of consensuality, brings the weight of the sex police’s criminalizing logics down upon them. The fact that it takes such an excruciating journey through physical and emotional violation to bring these characters to the point where they can love each other and still say “We’re not monsters” (pt. 6) calls attention to the ways the closet architecture operating in *SVU* and in its televisual and social context

circumscribes the desires that can freely emerge — and demonstrates fans' engagement with these mortal constraints in their own readings.

intertextual machine

If, as I have argued, the sexual violence that *SVU* investigates is linked to the discursive violence of the border wars that televisual lesbianism epitomizes, “Held” literalizes this connection. The atrocity of the circumstances that bring Olivia and Alex together seems to suggest that the barrier keeping them apart is so potent that it could only be breached by an act of unspeakable brutality. The fact that, here, Olivia and Alex’s first sexual experience together is actually an assault recodes the ideologically-charged indictment of slash as “character rape” because it is “a total violation of established characterizations” (Jenkins 466). It is relatively axiomatic in Olivia fan fiction that she and/or Alex are hindered in expressing their desire for each other by their professions or backgrounds — just as on the series any exploration of their personal lives is almost completely precluded. Following the contours of this loaded configuration, “Held” stipulates that Olivia and Alex weren’t romantically involved and never communicated their love before they were abducted. Referencing the diegetic restrictions and intensities that draw the outlines of their relationship, *Lost* writes that, in Olivia’s opinion, “Keeping a distance between herself and her investigators could only help Alex maintain her professional integrity,” and as a result, “In all the years they’d known one another, last night’s dinner [the occasion of their kidnapping] was probably only the fourth or fifth time they’d dined together without Elliot playing the role of the unacknowledged chaperone” (pt. 1). Thus, the despotic vectors that obstruct Olivia and Alex’s desire on TV are translated into a fictional labyrinth of agonizing violation and guilt from whence our heroines, in the end, triumphantly emerge.

Giving poignancy to the women's original enforced distance in the story is a recurring motif of each of the characters remembering watching the other. Many of these memories are, in fact, recapitulations of favorite onscreen moments from episodes of *SVU*: among Olivia's, "the night she and Elliot surprised [Alex] while she was out on a date, her hair up and dressed in a stunning red cocktail dress;... arguing about a case in the hallway outside her office" (pt. 3); among Alex's, "Olivia incongruously dressed in a shimmering black evening dress, standing next to her in front of the window looking into an interrogation room, their fingers accidentally brushing" (pt. 6). The latter passage continues, "Memories segued into fantasies: Olivia and she walking down a corridor and Olivia suddenly pushing her against the wall and claiming her mouth in a kiss, Olivia showing up late one night at her apartment and taking her from behind as she lay sprawled over the dining room table" (pt. 6). That is, observation and imagination, television and fiction, slide effortlessly into one another, often in the substance of a single event: Alex confesses, "The other night when I asked you out to dinner, I was half pretending it was a date" (pt. 3) — echoing in a more hopeful erotics the rich leveling economies correlating various planes of sexual violence.

As I have theorized *SVU* as a TV program (along with commentators like Sally Forth and Angie B.), the elements that conspire to render Olivia unrepresentable as a lesbian onscreen are ultimately extratextual: our culture's pervasive homophobia; the economic imperative to appeal to a mass audience; the gendered hazards bequeathed to television by historical hierarchies and transformations; the insidious ubiquity of the closet. Fan fiction stories like "Held," however, transpose the impediments to Olivia and Alex's romance from outside the text to inside the characters' psyches, reconstituting these oppressions as their individual fears and inhibitions. Even when fics thematize, as they often do, Olivia or Alex's struggle with prejudice or internalized homophobia, these conditions are still located as hang-ups that, while they may seethe with acknowledged violence, can be processed and (usually) overcome inter/personally.

Simultaneously, “Held” (and many other stories) also transpose the fans’ procedures of watching (obsessive scrutiny of the characters’ attire, vigilance for suspect looks and touches), as well as their tendency to fantasize about what they see, into the heads of the characters, converting the viewers’ competencies as sex detectives into Olivia and Alex’s erotic waltz. What appears is a kind of machine for collapsing TV’s divergent registers into each other — and it is in this interactive destabilization of the ostensibly obvious perimeters distinguishing text, audience, and metatext that lesbian desire in the televisual sense operates. Olivia can be my girlfriend, likewise, in my own libidinous interface with these perpetual flows of meaning wherein *SVU* episodes, industry gossip, and fan production penetrate and transform each other.

conclusions

After previewing selections from this paper while it was a work in progress, Sally Forth jokingly told me that she “Can’t wait to get to the ‘Olivia is really gay’ part” (personal correspondence). As I come to the concluding section, my readers will doubtless realize (if I haven’t made it amply explicit already) that there is no such part. Certainly, to some degree I myself wish, like any similarly invested fan (or any detective), that I could irrefutably prove my allegation. My intellectual enterprise in this paper, however, has been to establish that any evidence that might be tendered toward such a hypothetically unassailable outcome is always already ensnared in the swirling vortex of the closet, wherein the secret truths of (homo)sexuality are simultaneously exposed and effaced in relentless eddies, inseparable as they are from the spirals of knowledge and pleasure constitutive of television as a mass cultural commodity. Thus I am caught, too, between fannish zeal and scholarly rigor, between (at the risk of waxing heavy-handed with my metaphors) my impractically proximate desk and television. I maintain, though, that it is ultimately in such irresolvable tensions, in the incessant intertextual transmutations

among divergent terms and registers, that the most fruitful prospects for knowledge, pleasure (and of course, profit) lie.

If, in one sense, this paper is a colossal tease for those who may seek purchase to confirm, once and for all, that Olivia is a lesbian, in another, this ardent critical endeavor has been the supreme erotic encounter between Olivia (my fellow detective) and I, in defiance of the frontier dividing the real world from the one on the (TV or computer) screen — and what could be more substantial proof that Olivia swings my way than that? To clarify, I don't mean to fall back on the position that Olivia is finally most gay in viewers' readings of her as such, but rather to locate the reality of televisual lesbianism in the ceaseless churning between audiences and texts, public and private, masculine and feminine, fact and fantasy (and the rest). As a node in the diffuse online network of Olivia fandom, this paper too has permeable borders, and is promiscuously open to new interfaces and to continual expansion and reconfiguration. The epistemological and erotic connections it will or won't cultivate with fans, with academics, with the whole encompassing machine of televisual interpretation, only now begin to be generated.

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