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Sam Fujikawa
Denison University

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Sam Fujikawa

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Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a reclamation of queerness in villains, particularly Disney villains. In 2018, *BuzzFeed* uploaded a listicle ranking Disney villains “from least gay to most gay,” characterizing antagonists not as evil but instead “queer icons... worthy of the gayest spot on this list” (Stryker and LaConte, “We ranked the Disney villains from least gay to most gay”). Other publications like *Vice* viewed this phenomenon of “gay” villains differently, highlighting Disney’s tendency that follows a long history of positioning effeminate, queer coded men as the enemy, the villain (Ryan, “Why so many Disney villains sound 'gay'”). While these examples are only two out of many commentaries on the relationship between queerness and media representations of villains, a clear tension surfaces within even this small section of discourse, specifically a tension in whether queer villains can be reclaimed and celebrate queerness or instead project evil characteristics upon a marginalized community.

Pondering over this issue of representation, I found myself thinking about the queer characters and villains I found satisfying as a viewer, that is, those

whose identity was not demonized but complex and interesting, not sweeping in claims but representative of a slice of queer life in reasonably true approaches. Attempting to find multifaceted and productive representations of queer characters in turn meant looking for depictions with potential to challenge heteronormativity and reframe understandings that could oppress queer people in constitutive ways. With this potential of uncovering useful methods of depicting queer life in media, an opportunity opens to resist standardizing and harmful representations of queer people in subversive terms. Can villains be constructed in a way that resists heteronormative readings that lead to negative projections upon the queer community? In this paper, I look at how the HBO Max television series *Search Party* builds social commentary on queerness in the way the series portrays queer characters, specifically queer villains.

Description of *Search Party* as an Artifact

Search Party is an American, dark comedy television series created by Sarah-Violet Bliss, Charles Rogers, and Michael Showalter streaming on HBO Max. Starring Alia Shawkat, John Reynolds, John Early, and Meredith Hagner as Dory, Drew, Elliot, and Portia, respectively, a group of millennial Brooklynites, the series follows the friends as they search for a college classmate who goes missing and the events that ensue. As each season progresses, the program, while still following the same gang of characters, introduces new

plots and stylizations that pastiche notable genres of media such as the murder mystery, detective thriller, courtroom drama, and psychological thriller. With a prominent queer and female creative team and cast, *Search Party* is notable for its dissection of millennial life through marginalized lenses that were put into question amidst the cultural zeitgeist of its original airdate following the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. Yet rather than portraying queer or female characters in an overly sympathetic light, the series instead offers a biting satirical take on a symptom of self-absorption among Generation Y and the hipster culture of a gentrified New York City, providing acerbic characters who challenge a rhetoric of “good” and “bad” media representations vis-à-vis historically marginalized groups.

Although the show originally aired on TBS in 2016, the series was later picked up by HBO Max and has been streaming on the platform since its third season, gaining critical acclaim and a cult-like following for both subverting expectations of narrative and perspective when it comes to a genre exploring the lives of “entitled Millennials” (Syme, “‘Search Party’s brilliant, twisted portrait of a new lost generation.”). In the fourth season, *Search Party* introduces a *Silence of the Lambs*-style plotline, with the series’ anti-heroine Dory held captive by her superfan Chip, portrayed by Cole Escola, a character who, like the gendered figures of Buffalo Bill or Norman Bates, occasionally dons the appearance of a hegemonic woman while tormenting his female victim. Noting these “antiquated tropes of gender

themes,” co-creator Rogers admits that Chip’s strategy of drag is an attempt to destabilize a model of queer-coded characters holding a female persona as some form of realization of his apparent psychosis, since “Chip thinks it’s strategic to go out in public as a 70-year-old woman” (McHenry, “How search party landed on that surreal season 4 finale.”). With this reference to tropes of queerness in media, *Search Party* uses the character of Chip to reimagine a villain’s relationship to queerness and queer sensibilities as something not inherently evil but tangential and—importantly—tactical.

Description of Method

While I recognize and affirm that queer can be a term used to imply homosexual attractions or identities, I refer to it in a broader way, what Halperin defines as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant... [Queer is a] horizon of [possibilities for] reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation” (62). Understanding queer as directly contrary to some stable notion of normalcy invites an analysis of queerness beyond purely sexual terms yet still with some ability to orient oneself in more accommodating ideological stances. Additionally, my analysis of queer villains relies on Edelman’s research of how political enemies are constructed, specifically his differentiation between enemies and adversaries, which rests upon

whether opponents are vilified for their inherent nature or tactics and strategies (67). Applying this notion to queer villains can provide clearer analysis in whether characters' queerness or resistance to dominant culture are put into inherently negative terms or less restrictive strategic expressions. In relation to the terms in which queerness is conceptualized, specifically in humorous representations such as those on *Search Party*, I employ the idea of camp to analyze how audiences are hailed in their understandings of the show's premises and comedy. Wolf postulates that "we can conceive of camp as a queer decoding strategy, situating it in the broader framework of audience reception studies and thus beginning to explain the possible ways in which camp readings are motivated and deployed" (285). Recognizing camp—which is additionally tied to excessive performances of gender through theatrical tactics—as a specifically queer sensibility, I can then apply camp to evaluations of how representations position viewers in relation to queer characters, that is, whether they are rooted in heteronormative notions or queer camp (Wolf 285-6).

Focusing on season four of *Search Party*, I aim to provide an analysis of Chip, attempting to see how the depiction of his queerness functions in tandem with his role as a villain. By looking at both how he acts and how other characters perceive and portray him, I seek to see how the construction of his character functions in terms of representing marginalized persons. To do this, I watched and analyzed the entirety of *Search Party*'s fourth season, noting instances of scene, dialogue, or

imagery that have to do with either Chip's identity as a queer villain or a more general discourse of queerness within the universe of the series. Parsing these instances through the theoretical framework I establish in the previous paragraph, I furthermore rely on Burke's concept of identification and how "if an identification favorable to the speaker or his cause is made to seem favorable to the audience, there enters the possibility of such 'heightened consciousness'" (45). Thus, if connections are made to identify viewers with a queer sense of the world, perhaps there lies an opportunity to reconceive unconstructive understandings of queer characters and queer people.

Analysis

The fourth season's premiere of *Search Party*, "The Girl in the Basement," begins with the series' protagonist, Dory, held captive in a dank-looking location, her head shaven, body appearing weakened. Realizing her head is shaven, she asks her captor, Chip, about the condition of her hair, which he rationalizes by explaining that he needed her hair for his "Dory Doll," a facsimile reproduction that reveals an obsession with Dory. While bizarre, the moment is funny and subverts an expectation that would place the rationale behind Dory's shaved head in a realm of some demented or disturbed aspect of Chip's personality meant to frighten viewers or Dory. Instead, Chip shaved Dory's head simply to complete a Barbie-like doll, placing this instance of supposed harm toward Dory in a realm of

ridiculous strategies rather than some perverse or irrational need for female hair. This instance begins Chip's construction as a villain for viewers through his tactics rather than nature, a strategy that rhetorically distinguishes him as an adversary rather than enemy. Edelman describes this characterization of the enemy as based in inherent threats and thus markedly evil (67). By initiating Chip's role as villain with a humorous tactic in his antagonism toward Dory, *Search Party* resists connoting Chip in the category of enemy, which could entail in a projection of negative implications upon queerness or queer men in general. Instead, the series imagines a type of villain where queerness can be used as a strategy in achieving villainous goals rather an inherence that is rooted in some sense of evil.

"The Girl in the Basement" expands on this idea of queerness as informative not inherent to villainhood with Chip's subsequent actions of control vis-à-vis Dory, which he justifies as necessary for her to be protected from her group of friends who he believes are bad people. For example, at the end of the episode, after Chip tells Dory he will take her home, Dory wakes up in what appears to be her apartment yet turns out to be a plush recreation of her Brooklyn home. This setting works to both show Chip's destructively attentive obsession with Dory—he attributes this fixation to the two of them having "the same lips"—as well as his care and attention to detail in a domestic sphere that commonly is situated as a feminine space. While the show originally sets Dory confined in a dank and typically standard space when one thinks of being held captive—such as the literal hole

in the ground Buffalo Bill keeps his captor held in *The Silence of the Lambs*—by the end of the episode, this new setting subverts expectations once again, having Chip place Dory in a space he clearly spent a lot of time, energy, and care into creating for her. The situation remains the same in her captivity, but Chip’s domestic sensibilities, which can be tied to his queerness due to the hegemonically feminine role of such duties, invert the conditions to be shallowly more comfortable for Dory. His role of villain then becomes ambiguous, as certain queer markings to his antagonism, such as his creation of a comfortable model apartment for Dory, contrast his highly immoral acts of kidnapping and imprisoning Dory. Oliver and Ferchaud posit that this ambiguity troubles a simple reading of queer villains like Chip, providing depth to his character and subsequently resisting a reading that enables “viewers... to form associations between that group of people and the negative portrayal” (102). Through these acts, his queerness and role as villain are not necessarily separated but instead troubled in terms that question and resist normative readings that lead to homophobic conclusions.

Search Party additionally utilizes a performance of camp—a queer sensibility that invokes humor and excess into performances meant to make sense of the world through a queer lens—to resituate viewers into distinctly queer perspectives (Wolf 286-7). Given the series’ status as a comedy, it becomes evident that while he exists as a villain, Chip is meant to be seen as a comedic character. His subversion of expectations,

such as through the Dory Doll and plush apartment, as well as his general air and villainhood provide a great deal of comic relief into a situation that is typically read as an immense tragedy and struggle for a protagonist, a subversion that is typical to camp readings and portrayals. Perhaps the most evident performance of camp can be seen in his disguise as his Aunt Lylah, whose house he is holding Dory hostage in. Chip employs this drag persona of his aunt to potentially ward off any suspicions about what he is doing at the home; comedically, the series pokes fun at the absurdity of the situation when Dory asks how old his aunt is and, upon Chip responding 70, replies, “Do you think people could think you could be in your 70s?” (“Something Sharp”). Despite the clear age difference between Chip and his Lylah persona, the gag generally works in the series, with the disguise fooling neighbors like Paula Jo, a character played by Ann Dowd who regularly interacts with Chip as Lylah. With just a gray-streaked red wig, gaudy clothes, and transatlantic accent at his disposal, Chip’s performance as Lylah highlights an excess of femininity in its theatrics, two features of camp that Wolf notes as resisting rigidity in gender norms as well as utilizing queer humor as methods of survival—or in Chip’s case, maintaining control (286).

Chip’s use of drag in his role as villain and the resulting acceptance of his feminine performance by other characters additionally problematize standard models of queer male villains’ drag as somewhat demented or deranged, as characters like Norman Bates

or Buffalo Bill may imply. Rather than using femininity and female gender as some intrinsic desire that leads to a deranged or dangerous behavior, Chip's drag is contiguous to maintaining an illusion rather than fulfilling some "wrong" desire within a queer body. Making drag tactically functional in his role as a villain rather than as inherent to his villainous desires, *Search Party* creates implications of queer characters and heteronormativity that veer away from demonizing the queer. Chip's practice of drag and characters like Paula Jo's acceptance of his female performance destabilize a heteronormative understanding of gender as essential or constant; Chip's performance as Aunt Lylah "[imitates] gender, [and thus] drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler 330). To understand the comedy and conceptions of Chip in the terms of the series, a viewer must reposition himself then to resist reading Chip in heteronormative terms that essentialize gender or demonize queerness—to fully enjoy what is going on, viewers in short must identify themselves in the world of *Search Party* through a non-normative, specifically queer lens.

This requirement of identifying with a queer perspective to fully understand and enjoy the show's humor is apparent in more explicit ways as well, particularly in the characters' label of Chip as "the Twink," a term located within a decidedly queer lexicon and refers to a young (usually gay) man with a slight build. In "The Girl in the Basement," Dory's first words to Chip are, "Are you... the twink? From the wedding?" referring to the previous season's storyline where Chip

(then unnamed) pretended to work at her friend Elliot's wedding for a Twinkies Catering, a catering company whose staff was entirely made up of, namely, twinks. While Westerefelhaus and Lacroix note that certain media representations of queer characters can ultimately reaffirm a dominant power structure that center heterosexual conceptions of reality, *Search Party* forces viewers to adhere to queer rhetorical frameworks without any explanation to those outside of the know (440). I admit the series does eventually define a twink as "a young man with a slim build and supple, boyish qualities" though they tack on the decidedly queer humorous adage with, "But at a certain age, a twink becomes a twunk" ("The Thoughtless Woman"). This definition of twink, however, is offered in the sixth episode of the season, long after many iterations of the word are used in humorous dialogue, reaffirming queer perspectives as central to the show's sense of humor and worldview.

This queer sense of humor is also present in other characters' descriptions of Chip, such as when Elliot calls the catering company to find out more about Chip and is told, "He's 30 years old and mostly a bottom" ("Doctor Mindbender"). Relying on an understanding of sexual terminology revolving anal sex and refusing to explain so in its briefness, this example of humor within *Search Party* reaffirms queerness and queer perspectives as central. By centering queer perceptions and characters, the series challenges any readings that would allow viewers to project Chip's villainous traits to queer people in general, as Chip exists as one

representation among a setting where heteronormative perspectives are sidelined and thus queerness is no longer limited. Viewers are invited, and often forced, to identify with queer characters and perspectives, shifting narratives and conditions to reflect distinctly queer notions of the world. And this identification with a queer framework through unapologetically queer humor and camp, as Burke noted in his discussion of the power of the rhetorical world, has the potential to open a new awareness of queer people in positive ways.

Discussion

In looking at how *Search Party* portrays queer villains such as Chip, I have found that the series ultimately resists and subverts tropes of queer villainhood established by characters such as Norman Bates or Buffalo Bill. With Chip, the program offers a way of constructing queer villains that separates evil from an inherence to queerness and instead uses queer tactics to create a villain of camp who is complex and ambiguous in a binary of good and evil. *Search Party* resists heteronormative structures typical to mainstream representations of queer characters to provide a queer-centered lens and perspective in narratives that include both straight and queer characters. By centering a queer sense of the world, the series encourages viewers to embrace non-dominant narratives and language, providing commentary that allows for queer characters to be villains without worrying over whether they are “good” or “bad” representations.

Centering queer voices and conditions of the world within the world of *Search Party* allows for a multiplicity to be applied to queer characters. In multiplicity there exists more than one sole representation, more than one understanding that must therefore be projected upon a community that is marginalized and thus simplified to reductive quality. Through Chip's depiction and characterization internal to the series' world and perspective, *Search Party* provides a method of depicting queer lives in more malleable ways, outside of rigid discourses that force a binary of good or bad and instead see dynamic complexity in lives that can so often be construed in an unsophisticated essential form of villain. With these more complex and less sweeping methods of identifying with a queer sensibility, new opportunities to reconceive reality in ways that exist outside of the dominant can be unlocked, shifting perspectives to privilege historically relegated experiences and persons

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