Dream Queer: Does Fitz Offer Positive Bisexual Representation on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*?

Rowan Meredith and Sharon Sutherland

[1] The most recent GLAAD study of LGBT representation on television reports an increase in the representation of bisexual characters on broadcast and cable television, including a notable increase in the numbers of bisexual male characters (GLAAD, *Where Are We on TV '16-'17* 24)[1]. Nonetheless, bisexual male characters remain under-represented on television (GLAAD, *Reporting on the Bisexual Community* 9)[2] and, just as importantly, bisexual characters tend to play out negative stereotypes: they are depicted as untrustworthy, prone to infidelity, and likely to use sex as a means of manipulation (GLAAD, *Where Are We on TV 2015-16* 26). Likewise, bisexuality frequently is associated with self-destructive behavior or is treated as a temporary plot device that is rarely mentioned again (GLAAD, *Where Are We on TV 2015-16* 26). It is not surprising, then, that positive representations of bisexuality, and especially male bisexuality, raise hopes of improved visibility and of the possibility of countering stereotypes about bisexuality held by both the straight and

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Rowan Meredith is a third-year law student at UCLA, where she is specializing in Media, Entertainment, and Technology Law and Policy. She is a member of OUTLaw which organizes social and educational activities for gender, sexual and romantic minorities at the law school. She has been a fan of Whedon from the age of two, and co-presented with Sharon Sutherland and Darsey Meredith on "Raising Slayers: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* through a Generational Lens" at the Euro-Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses in June 2016.

Sharon Sutherland is a mediator, lawyer, and collaborative game designer. She is Manager of Training with British Columbia's Child Protection Mediation Practicum. Sharon has been engaged with scholarship in the Whedonverses since 2004 when she presented at the first Slayage conference in Nashville with colleague and frequent co-author Sarah Swan. Her publications on Whedon include chapters in *Reading Joss Whedon*, *The Literary Angel,* and *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*. Sharon was a full-time law professor at Allard Hall Faculty of Law for 14 years.

queer communities. For many viewers, a very small number of scenes in Season Two of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (*S.H.I.E.L.D.*) (2013-) gave rise to speculation that Leo Fitz might be such a positive representative of male bisexuality. In particular, one scene in which he acknowledges while hallucinating that he finds his colleague, Alphonso "Mack" Mackenzie, attractive led to fan speculation about Fitz's sexuality ("A Hen in the Wolf House" 2.5).

[2] The use of hallucination, and more commonly dream sequences, as a device to suggest that a character might be queer has been a television trope occurring periodically since at least the 1990s.[3] In most instances, a character dreams of a homoerotic encounter. The audience views the encounter, and so experiences the possibility of the queer attraction, but the character typically disavows that possibility outside of the dream world. This device has a problematic history: it has been used both as a comic device in ways that assume homophobic responses to homoerotic dreams are both inevitable and appropriate; it is usually viewed as an indication that a character might be gay, almost always erasing the possibility of bisexuality or any other non-binary understanding of sexuality; and it has been strongly associated with accusations of "queerbaiting."[4] While a more positive take on the trope is that it creates space to show queer sexuality in a television world in which pressures from and on networks made it difficult to offer meaningful queer representation (due to a perception that audiences are reluctant to see such characters portrayed and concerns of boycotts by groups of audience members or advertisers), that argument is considerably less persuasive post-*Obergefell* (the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision in favor of same-sex marriage rights) amidst increased acceptance towards queer people. In this article, we will consider the ways in which Fitz's hallucinatory dream fits into the landscape of recent television uses of the "dream queer" trope and his related potential to serve as a positive representation of male bisexuality.

"Dream Queer"

[3] For some years, there has been a growing number of television series using dreams and hallucinations as devices for suggesting that a

character might be queer. This trope—the "dream queer"—commonly follows a pattern: a character dreams of a homoerotic encounter allowing a queer-viewing audience to read the character as queer, but the lack of acknowledgment outside of the dream sequence simultaneously leaves the character's sexuality ambiguous for those who choose to view the character as straight. While a dream sequence is the most common mechanism for engaging the audience this way, there are analogous forms which we include in our consideration. Hallucinations, such as Fitz's experience, are similarly utilized as a view into a character's uncontrolled imaginings. Likewise, we suggest that some other fantasy devices serve similar functions and can be considered variations of the trope. Common amongst all variations on the trope is a disconnect from the central "reality" of the series, allowing viewers to read the trope either as a reflection of the character's most honest self or as disconnected from and unrepresentative of the character's true self, according to the viewer's preference.

[4] The dream queer trope has been most frequently employed in sitcoms where it is typically played for comedy and hence carries inevitable homophobic undertones. In these shows, a (usually) male character experiences a homoerotic dream about a friend and is deeply disturbed when he awakes, afraid that he is "becoming gay." If the friend (or someone else) finds out about the dream, it is played up as comic: the possibility of a character being homosexual is treated as ridiculous or alarming. Bisexuality is simply not raised as a possibility.

[5] *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-), for example, uses this trope as an element in its ongoing hinting that characters Raj and Howard have a homoerotic attraction to each other. The notion that one or both might be either gay or bisexual is treated throughout the series as fodder for comedy. In "The Bus Pants Utilization" (4.12), Raj tells Howard he dreamt that they owned neighboring mansions with a secret tunnel from Howard's front door to Raj's back door. Howard is quick to ensure that he disavows any possible non-heterosexual interpretations. The extended laugh track playing after the description of the dream, and again following Howard's assertion that he will now shower at home when he and Raj play handball, emphasizes the fact that the possibility of attraction is meant to be funny and that queer sexuality is a source of

comedy. *The Big Bang Theory* is especially problematic in its constant teasing of and apparent distaste for the potential for gay relationships and its assumption of the impossibility of bisexuality; however, most sitcoms that make use of the trope similarly posit that a homoerotic dream can only lead to a contemplation of a character's sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual. Bisexuality is almost never a consideration that flows from such a dream.[5]

[6] Within television dramas, the dream queer trope is less common. Its use in drama, however, is also more varied. Fitz's hallucinatory confession fits much more clearly with the examples of this trope found amongst dramatic series. In dramatic series, the teasing of erotic possibility between characters tends to fall on a continuum defined by the creators' relationship to the show's fandom: most shows can be seen to fall on a spectrum between "fan service" and "queerbaiting." We have chosen two examples of shows that make more than usual use of the trope to illustrate the two ends of this spectrum. At the fan service end of the spectrum, *True Blood* (2008-14), with its erotic hallucinations triggered by drinking vampire blood, exemplifies a show that seeks to provide its fans with erotic, queer imagery in response to perceived fan demand. On the other end of the spectrum, *Supernatural* (2005-) utilizes a range of related mechanisms to hint at the potential for queer relationships, while explicitly scolding fans for hoping to see these relationships realized in canon.

[7] Within the world of *True Blood*, vampire blood (known as V) is a highly addictive substance for humans. Its impacts include increased strength and senses, healing of injuries, heightened sexual experiences, and hallucinations. Notably, consuming a vampire's blood causes a human to have vivid, erotic dreams about the vampire, regardless of waking sexuality. Amongst other scenes and references to hallucinatory erotic dreams, we see dreams featuring Sookie and Eric ("New World in My View," 2.10); Sam and Bill ("Bad Blood," 3.1); Sookie, Eric and Bill ("Let's Get out of Here," 4.9); Jason and Jessica (who turns into Hoyt just before Jason wakes up) ("Me and the Devil," 4.5); and Jason and Warlow ("At Last," 6.4). For the most part, fans of the show viewed these sequences as an element in the show's overall approach: *True Blood* has often been cited as focusing on fan service—the use of sexualized

situations to reward viewers. Even outside of dream sequences, *True Blood* offered a highly eroticized experience for fans. Within that framework, the fact that most queer sex scenes occurred as dream sequences was viewed by fans more as a mechanism for showing combinations of characters that would not otherwise be seen together in a plot based loosely on the *Southern Vampire* novels by Charlaine Harris. Arguably the culmination of fan service dream sequences in *True Blood* was the season 7 encounter between Jason and Eric ("I Found You," 7.2), which was teased in season 6 when Eric gave Jason his blood to heal him. At the time, Eric said, "You're in for a treat, my friend. When you dream of me, dream of nice things," creating considerable anticipation of a possible dream scene in the new season ("Life Matters," 6.9, 00:18:18-38).

[8] In contrast to *True Blood*, *Supernatural* has been so repeatedly critiqued for queerbaiting that it is one of the most commonly cited examples of the phenomenon in online definitions.[6] Many scholars have explored this critique, particularly with regard to the eroticized presentation of the relationship between Dean Winchester and Castiel (a "'ship" [relationship] referred to as Destiel).[7] Certainly there is considerable agreement that *Supernatural* has hinted at the possibility of a romantic relationship between Dean and Castiel. Our focus in this paper is on the manner in which *Supernatural* reflects a current use of dreams or hallucinations to offer fans a view of possible queer relationships, and particularly the way in which it uses such devices both to support and undercut a fan reading of Dean as bisexual.

[9] As a show that has run twelve seasons as of 2017, *Supernatural* has a long history of hinting that Dean Winchester might be attracted to men as well as women. For example, in the season five episode "Changing Channels" (5.8), Dean and his brother, Sam, are trapped in "TV land" by an archangel. They move as characters through varied television shows, forced to play along with the show's format. At one point, they are trapped in *Dr. Sexy, MD*, a *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) parody. Dean recognizes the show quickly, and it becomes clear that he is a fan. It is also clear when Dr. Sexy appears that Dean finds him sexy. Similarly, when a siren appears in the season four episode "Sex and Violence" (4.14), it does not appear to Dean as an attractive woman, but

rather as the perfect brother. While the episode explains that Dean's connection with the siren is a reflection on his distrust towards his own brother, much of the interaction between Dean and the siren reads as a developing romantic interest.[8] Fans certainly read the episode as suggesting that Dean is bisexual.[9] There are numerous other examples of suggestions of Dean's bisexuality throughout the series, often most pronounced in scenes like these that place Dean in an alternate reality or under the influence of supernatural power. There are also many textual suggestions that there is a romantic and potentially sexual attraction between Dean and Castiel, including repeated comments by other characters.

[10] *Supernatural* is unusual in the degree to which it engages textually with its fans: in particular, the series is well-known for its "meta" episodes, which make explicit reference to fanfiction about its characters and even depict fan conventions. We suggest that one such episode, in particular, can be understood as utilizing an unusual device analogous to a dream or hallucination in order to tease the possibility of Destiel: the show's 200th episode, "Fan Fiction" (10.5), which was written to celebrate the show and its fans. The main characters, Dean and Sam, investigate a monster-of-the-week at a high school that just happens to be staging a musical about their lives as drawn from a series of books published about them. This conceit allows the writers to reference fans' perceptions of a relationship between Dean and Castiel both through the play itself (for example, Castiel has a solo about waiting patiently by the side of the road for hours because Dean asked him to) and through the actors cast to play Dean and Castiel. The high school girls who play the parts of Dean and Castiel are seen hugging while offstage. Dean learns that the actors playing the parts are in a relationship, and is advised that the play will explore Destiel in Act Two. While not a dream sequence, the scene serves a similar purpose in that it allows viewers to glimpse a world in which Dean and Castiel are romantically linked. However, *Supernatural* consistently undercuts the possibility of Dean's bisexuality with assertions that Dean is straight. In this case, where the show plays out a scene that might otherwise be viewed as fan service, it is not allowed to stand as possibility: instead, Dean's reaction is to break the fourth wall and give a disdainful look into

the camera, clearly referencing the actor's continuing denial of the possibility of fans' queer readings whenever the topic arises at fan conventions.[10] As well, at the end of the show, Sam teases Dean about Destiel subtext, while Dean continues to refute the possibility as though it is insulting. It is this combination of inviting the fandom to contemplate the potential of a bisexual male lead character while simultaneously treating the idea as both ridiculous and comic that leads to *Supernatural*'s frequent identification with queerbaiting.

"He's quite a lot of man."[11]

[11] Throughout *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s first season, most fan "shipping" of Leo Fitz paired him with Jemma Simmons. The characters' names seem chosen to create a ready "ship name": FitzSimmons, and their close working relationship throughout Season One led, unsurprisingly, to Fitz making a declaration of love for Simmons whilst anticipating death in the season finale ("Beginning of the End," 1.16). Fitz's sexuality throughout the season receives little attention: he has an attachment to Simmons that eventually proves to be romantic, and, given no other information, he is presumed to be heterosexual.

[12] At the start of season two, Fitz has undergone a dramatic change following his near death experience: he has suffered a traumatic brain injury leading to challenges in communication and fine motor control. He is frustrated by these changes, and this comes out in moments of extreme, seemingly uncontrollable emotion. Just as important as his injury, Simmons has rejected Fitz's declarations of love and has left S.H.I.E.L.D. (on a mission that Fitz is not privy to). In his struggles, Fitz clings to an image of Simmons—he hallucinates her presence and carries on conversations with "dream Simmons" as he works through problems. Her presence is a comfort during his emotional struggles, and he engages in problem-solving dialogue with dream Simmons as he did previously with her real counterpart, even continuing to give her credit for new ideas though they are products of his subconscious.

[13] The fifth episode of Season Two, "A Hen in the Wolf House," contains the hallucinatory scene that opens up the possibility of

Fitz being bisexual. In this short scene, Fitz and dream Simmons are standing together observing Mack working under a car. Mack is wearing a sleeveless, grease-stained shirt, muscles emphasized by sweat, and is clearly shot to be admired for his physical attractiveness. Dream Simmons and Fitz engage in a very short conversation:

> SIMMONS: Mack certainly has an impressive physique, wouldn't you say?
> FITZ: Bugger off.
> SIMMONS: No. it's true. Look at him. He's quite a lot of man.
> FITZ: Well, obviously I agree…. what with you being my subconscious and everything. What? I can say that to you. It doesn't mean anything. It's just a casual observation. That's all it is. (2.5, 00:10:24-43)

This very short exchange is the most explicit reference the show makes to the possibility of Fitz's attraction to Mack, or to any other man.

[14] Like other instances of the "dream queer" trope discussed in this article, Fitz's hallucination allows writers to include an explicit suggestion of bisexuality without the perceived danger of alienating potentially biphobic audiences. The suggestion of queer representation stays behind a barrier of "safety." It is also relevant that Fitz only acknowledges his attraction to Mack to his own sub-conscious—he at no point tells the real Simmons, for instance, of the hallucination, the attraction, or any other feelings he might have towards Mack. His feelings stay firmly disconnected from the central reality of the series.

[15] Unlike the more negative instances of the "dream queer" trope, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* does not make a joke out of Fitz's attraction to Mack. It does, however, show Fitz downplaying the relevance of his observation, and Fitz does in the first instance reject dream Simmons' comments (with the words "bugger off"), before eventually accepting his attraction. Fitz's downplaying of the significance of his observation differs from the way in which *Supernatural* immediately negates the possibility that Dean is anything other than straight by either immediately denying that he is attracted to men, or by introducing a female sexual partner or interest.[12] Fitz's comment can be understood two different ways: a heteronormative reading of the scene might

interpret Fitz's comment as backpedaling on the possibility of sexual attraction to a man, but the comment can also be understood to support a reading that Fitz is bisexual, but telling dream Simmons that nothing is happening between Fitz and Mack. This more ambiguous statement allows different viewers to understand the scene differently, a technique used to code queer readings for queer audiences rather than making them explicit.

[16] Unfortunately, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* gives the viewer very little more information on Fitz's attraction to Mack outside of the dream space. There are other interactions between Fitz and Mack in Season Two that, while not explicit indicators of attraction, inspired fans to desire an on-screen relationship between the two characters. Early in Season Two, for instance, Fitz is treated carefully by all of his former colleagues as a result of his brain injury. They see the differences in his capacities, and they are cautious of pushing him, instead tending to ignore the changes and to pretend all is well while no longer relying on or trusting his abilities. Meanwhile, Mack treats Fitz like the genius he is. He is patient with Fitz as he struggles to form sentences, and tends to be more trusting of his decisions. His kindness and understanding, without at any point pitying Fitz, allows Fitz to start to recover from the emotional trauma he has been enduring.

[17] The interactions between Mack and Fitz are in stark contrast to those that occur between Fitz and Simmons upon her return to S.H.I.E.L.D. Simmons continues to be distressed by the changes in Fitz's demeanor and her perception that his mental capacity has deteriorated. This causes Fitz to be angry with Simmons and hostile towards her on many occasions. In "A Fractured House" (2.6), Fitz angrily challenges Simmons that she left when he needed her most. When she leaves, unable or unwilling to have a conversation about the topic, the camera finds Mack approaching Fitz supportively. When Simmons later returns carrying tea, presumably meaning to try again to speak with Fitz, she sees Fitz and Mack close together, sharing a computer screen and chatting animatedly. Mack leans into Fitz's space in a way that can be read as more than platonic. He touches Fitz's arm, a movement that is often coded as flirtatious between men and women. It is also clear to Simmons and viewers that Mack has helped Fitz to

identify and articulate the important point that earlier he was unable to communicate to Simmons.

[18] Simmons's reaction to the relationship between Fitz and Mack can be read as jealousy, whether jealousy that Mack is taking her place as Fitz's best friend and closest colleague or romantic jealousy or a combination. Neither is clearly stated, nor is either disallowed. When Simmons tries to thank Mack for helping Fitz, her words resonate with a presumption that she has some prior claim to speak as Fitz's partner or family member about his well-being. It also emphasizes her perception that Fitz needs help. Mack makes it clear that he views Fitz entirely differently than she does. Mack doesn't "help him," he "likes him," (2.6, 00:35:23-35) something that he questions whether Simmons can do now that Fitz is different than he was. He tells her bluntly, "I heard he told you how he felt and you bailed" (2.6, 00:35:42-45). And he continues, "…from what I've seen, the only thing that makes him worse, is you" (2.6, 00:35:55-00:36:01). The scene reads clearly as territorial, and is easily understood as romantic if one assumes Fitz's (or Mack's) bisexuality. The contrast between Fitz's interactions with his acknowledged love interest, Simmons, and with his only-acknowledged-through-hallucination love interest, Mack, encourages fans to pair the two men together.

[19] The combination of the "dream queer" trope with a narrative arc that pits Mack against Simmons for a role as Fitz's closest support allows viewers to contemplate Mack as a rival for Fitz's romantic interest as well as his friendship. While the show is not explicit about the romantic potential between Mack and Fitz, there is no overt negation of the possibility. It is interesting to note that Mack's strength as a candidate for Fitz's affection (at least in contrast to Simmons) lies most especially in his empathy and kindness: Mack is patient, affectionate, and supportive where Simmons is impatient and judgmental. It would be easy to emphasize Mack's characteristics as stereotypically feminine strengths, but Mack is never feminized. On the contrary, Mack's physical masculinity is emphasized by the way he is shot. In all ways, Mack is shown to be an ideal match for Fitz and arguably a better match than Simmons. His physical attractiveness only adds to this understanding, rather than undercutting it through emphasis on his masculinity.

Furthermore, the dynamic between Mack, Fitz, and Simmons does not fall into the common bi-erasure trap of expecting Fitz to be either straight or gay: Fitz is able to maintain his interest for Simmons while also experiencing attraction towards Mack. In these ways, while *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s queer representation continues to suffer from the fact that Fitz's attraction is never resolved nor even acknowledged outside of the hallucination, the series is still more successful than many other television series at allowing room for bisexuality.

[20] It is important to note that this reading of Fitz's relationship with Mack does not account for issues of intersectional representation, an area in which Whedon's works notoriously fall short.[13] Mack's masculinity may be unusual in the portrayal of gay or bisexual male characters, but it is a stereotypical portrayal of a black male character. The ways in which dream-Simmons and Fitz ogle Mack's black masculinity, positioning Mack as object rather than a subject with agency in the scene, is particularly problematic in the context of Whedon's history overall and of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* in particular. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* tends to demonize black masculinity. Three black, male characters enact betrayals: Mike Peterson is forced to take innocent lives with his black male strength; Andrew Garner becomes Lash, a large, hypermasculine "monster" that kills other Inhumans; and even Mack himself eventually betrays the team and Fitz. As a result, the use of Mack as an object of desire carries additional problematic racial overtones beyond (and connected with) the questions raised in relation to sexuality.

[21] While this article is focused on Fitz's bisexuality and his attraction to Mack, and not on Mack's sexuality or potential attraction to Fitz (primarily because Mack's sexuality is never made explicit, even within a dream sequence), we should acknowledge that there are several instances in which Mack is also portrayed as potentially interested in Fitz (including his jealous interactions with Simmons, his statement that "I like him," and his leaning into Fitz's personal space). The series fails to actualize any of these potential feelings, and Mack later develops a relationship with a female team member, Elena "Yo-Yo" Rodriguez. The fact that Mack's sexuality is given less focus than Fitz's—even when their connection to each other is the focus—follows a pattern in Whedon's work more generally: white characters tend to receive more

nuanced explorations than characters of color.[14]

Bisexuality in Whedon

[22] In examining Fitz's possibilities as a bisexual character, it is also helpful to place him within Joss Whedon's broader oeuvre.[15] Despite considerable recognition for creating one of the most powerful and positive early representations of queer love in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Willow and Tara, Whedon's shows are arguably short on queer characters—at least queer characters who are not monstrous—and on consensual queer relationships. In particular, bisexuality has played a very limited and problematic role in Whedon's series. As Em McAvan has noted, Willow's story arc from "geek with an unrequited crush" on her male friend to "relationships with fellow witch Tara and Slayer potential Kennedy" can be viewed as a "not uncommon 'coming out' narrative" (para. 2). Willow is a teenager when the show begins, and, of course, the show began in 1997, when Willow's exposure to LGBTQ representations and information would have been highly restricted. Both of these facts make it reasonable to expect that Willow was learning that she is "kinda gay" ("Tabula Rasa," 6.8, 00:32:15-16), rather than that Willow is an example of bi-erasure. Nonetheless, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) does have its bisexual characters and references, but these tend to fall into negative stereotypes: Willow is coded as bisexual, "evil and skanky" ("Doppelgangland," 3.16, 00:29:21-25) when she is a vampire in two Season Three episodes ("The Wish," 3.9 and "Doppelgangland") and when she is evil Willow in Season Six (McAvan, para. 6 and 17-19). Similarly, other vampire characters are portrayed as bisexual when not in possession of souls—their bisexuality is thereby linked to their being evil.[16] Other characters whose storylines or portrayals suggest the possibility of bisexuality are seen to have indulged in bisexuality while they were "bad." For example, Faith has been read as bisexual and attracted to Buffy but only during her seasons as a "bad girl" (Casano, Ward); and Giles's interactions with Ethan Rayne are similarly eroticized and seem to suggest a relationship while they were engaged in "black magic."[17]

[23] Further, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also engaged in significant

queerbaiting, in particular with the character of Xander. While Xander is never explicitly identified as anything other than straight, Tresca notes numerous instances of suggestions and assumptions that Xander is gay and his considerable discomfort at the possibility that others will believe him to be so (27-31). At the same time, Xander comments on both Riley's and Spike's physical appeal in ways that are quite similar to Fitz's hallucinatory comments on Mack. On seeing the Initiative in "Goodbye Iowa" (4.14, 00:29:44-48), Xander comments, "I totally get it now. Can I have sex with Riley, too?" Similarly, he notes that, if Buffy were having sex with Spike, "It's understandable. Spike is strong and mysterious and sort of compact but well-muscled…" ("Intervention," 5.18, 00:30:47-54). Yet unlike with Fitz's admission that he finds Mack attractive, in each of these instances, Xander's evident awareness of the physical attractiveness of male characters is used as a source of amusement and teasing. The possibility that Xander might be bisexual is not contemplated: instead, the possibility that he is gay is treated as a source of humor (see Greenwood, this issue). As a result of such characterizations, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the earlier series to include positive queer representation at all, it nonetheless reinforces the stereotypes that bisexuals are either hypersexualized and monstrous, or straight people with occasional homoerotic fantasies.

[24] Whedon's television series between *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *S.H.I.E.L.D.* do little to expand on the potential for bisexuality. *Angel* (1999-2004) adds little to *Buffy*'s linkage of bisexuality with evil. For example, Spike confirms that he and Angel "have never been intimate. Except that one…" ("Power Play," 5.21, 00:12:20-24), seeming to suggest that some sexual encounter between them took place when they were both soulless. *Firefly* (2002) and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) are deeply problematic to read as having any potentially bisexual characters, given that the characters who do apparently have sex with both men and women do so in situations that are arguably non-consensual or do not reflect the character's sexuality. While Inara is shown to have choice in her clients and to consider women as well as men, it is not clear that her choice of women—far less frequent than her choice of men—reflects her own sexuality as opposed to other criteria Companions might apply in client selection. *Dollhouse* is, of course even more problematic: dolls

are wiped of their personalities and programmed with new traits each time they are used as Actives. As a consequence, the dolls' pre-programming sexuality cannot be known while they are in their doll state.

[25] Prior to Fitz's possible interest in Mack, *S.H.I.E.L.D* itself did not acknowledge any characters as LGBTQ.[18] As has frequently been noted, this is despite the fact that two of the characters, Victoria Hand and Isabelle Hartley, are canonically queer in the comics on which the show is based and had a relationship with each other.[19] Interestingly, in an interview regarding Season Two, executive producers Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen indicated that it was a conscious choice not to explore the relationship between the two characters or to make their sexuality explicit in an effort to be respectful to the LGBTQ community. When prompted "[i]t seemed like you were going to explore Isabelle being the late Victoria Hand's love interest from the comic," the two replied:

> **Whedon:** There were versions, but it started to be irresponsible if we addressed it to not address it with more weight and time and energy.
>
> **Maurissa Tancharoen:** And then we would've been known as the people who killed off two lesbians on the show. (Abrams)

[26] These comments clearly indicate an awareness of, and presumably sensitivity to, growing fan concern over the deaths of gay characters as plot devices, a trope that has come to be known as "Bury Your Gays." Fan reaction to the trope reached an all-time high in 2016 following the deaths of "25 lesbian or bisexual female identifying characters" on scripted broadcast and cable television and streaming series from the beginning of 2016 to November 3rd of that year (GLAAD, *Where We Are on TV, 2015-16*; "The 35 Most Horrifying"). Yet the trope was certainly not new in 2016 (Riese), and it is worth noting that *S.H.I.E.L.D* creators were thinking about ways to ensure they did not fall into the pattern of creating a lesbian or bisexual character only to kill them for the advancement of storylines peopled by straight characters. Still, the conscious choice to take these two

canonically queer characters (rather than taking two other characters from the *Marvel* comics, or indeed creating original characters) for the purposes of this storyline conveys a message of deliberate queer erasure, while also resulting in the deaths of characters the queer audience is likely to read as queer, for the advancement of straight characters' storylines.

Conclusion

[27] While hints that Fitz might be bisexual are few, and the only arguably explicit statement in that regard is a comment he makes within a hallucination, the possibility is important. The absence of positive bisexual representation (especially amongst men), and the tendency of most television series to frame all considerations of characters' sexualities as heterosexual or homosexual, leads many viewers to look for possible representations wherever they may exist. Dream sequences, hallucinations, and other devices that offer a form of disconnect from the show's reality operate to allow viewers to see possibilities of queer sexuality: whether that view operates positively or negatively depends greatly on the show's handling of the sequence when the characters are returned to their reality. In the case of Fitz's hallucination, *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s approach is closer to that of *True Blood* than *Supernatural*, or closer to fan service than to queerbaiting. Where *True Blood* serves its fans highly eroticized scenes that allow viewers to see many different pairings of their favorite characters together, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* offers a much more speculative look at the possibility of Fitz and Mack getting together. To the extent that Fitz's hallucination can be characterized as fan service, it serves imagination rather than voyeuristic pleasure.

[28] The fact that *S.H.I.E.L.D.* raises the possibility of bisexuality, sets up a storyline in which Simmons and Mack are clearly rivals for Fitz's attention, but never makes either Fitz's or Mack's sexuality explicit, is disappointing. Instead of identifying Fitz as a positive bisexual representation, which the hallucination scene creates the space to do, the choice to leave his sexuality ambiguous has the inevitable result of making the possibility invisible to most audience members who view his story through a heteronormative lens. That said, within Fitz's broader

story arc—one which no doubt assumed he would eventually have a romantic relationship with Simmons—the choice of a male rival (despite ambiguity around what he is a rival for) is what opens up the possibility that Fitz is bisexual. This choice might be viewed as a positive move towards representation that simply did not go far enough to be clear to most viewers.

[28] Some viewers will conclude that sequences like this that set up a possibility of a queer relationship, but do not follow through, are in all instances queerbaiting. In this case, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* certainly does tease a possible relationship without either exploring the relationship or even being explicit that the rivalry plotline is more than a competition to work most closely with Fitz. Where it does better than shows like *Supernatural* is in the fact that it does not actively disallow the possibilities in the rivalry, either. When *S.H.I.E.L.D.* poses Fitz and Mack in close contact, with Mack reaching out to touch Fitz's arm, it does not follow up with a statement that one or the other of the men is straight. On the contrary, it allows Simmons' look at the two of them together to be taken as a layered form of jealousy encompassing the many ways in which Fitz has been relying on Mack instead of her. Were it not for the show's silence on Fitz's sexuality, one could argue that the choice of Mack as Simmons' rival reflects a normalization of bisexuality that is positive.

[29] Despite the addition of Joey Gutierrez as a recurring character, there is much still to be desired in *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s overall representation of queer characters. Season Two Fitz offers a small window into the possibility of positive representation. That window is still open: perhaps over time Fitz's story arc, or perhaps Mack's, will allow *S.H.I.E.L.D.* to explore bisexuality more fully.

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[1] According to the GLAAD report, there are now 64 women and 19 men counted as bisexual regular or recurring characters on television (GLAAD, *Where Are We on TV '16-'17* 24).

[2] Of the over 9 million LGBT persons in the US, more than half identify as bisexual: 33% women and 19% men. On television, 30% of LGBT characters are bisexual, 23% women and 7% men (GLAAD, *Where Are We on TV '16-'17* 24).

[3] Some early examples of homoerotic dreams include: *Murphy Brown* (1988-98), "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are"(aired 3 Apr. 1992); *Frasier* (1993-2004), "The Impossible Dream" (aired 15 Oct. 1996); and *That 70s Show* (1998-2006), "You Shook Me" (aired 16 Apr. 2003).

[4] The term "queerbaiting" has developed among media fans to "criticise homoerotic suggestiveness in contemporary television when this suggestiveness is not actualised in the program narrative" (Brennan 1).

[5] One series that does tie a homoerotic dream to a character's likely bisexuality is *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-14). It is interesting to note that Lily Aldrin (played by Alyson Hannigan who previously played Whedon's most famous queer character, Willow Rosenberg) is the character who has a dream about her friend Robin that leads her to comment,"Robin Scherbatsky is many things: friend, confidante, occasional guest star in some confusing dreams that remind me a woman's sexuality is a moving target" ("Robin 101" 5.3, 00:03:04-15). While Lily's interest in women is mentioned often throughout the series, it is played for comedy in such a way that it reinforces the notion that non-heterosexuality, and specifically bisexuality in women, is not to be taken seriously.

[6] Examples of the use of *Supernatural* as a primary illustration in definitions of queerbaiting can be found in online sites such as *Wikipedia* ("Queer Baiting"), the *Urban Dictionary* ("Queering Baiting – Definition") and *Fanlore* ("Queer Baiting – Fanlore").

[7] For examples, see Collier, Brennan, and Donio.

[8] The homoerotic and incestuous overtones of this episode are reflective of another aspect of the series' problematic relationship with queer sexualities: from its early days, fans noted a homoerotic subtext between the lead characters, brothers Dean and Sam. The writers supported that reading with frequent textual references to the apparent sexual and/or romantic tension between Dean and Sam leading other characters to assume that they are a couple. That this mistake is treated as a joke (and offensive to Dean), combined with the linkage between homosexuality and incest, marks both as abnormal and wrong. For discussion of "Wincest"—as this relationship is often called—see KT Torrey's "Writing the Winchesters: Metatextual Wincest and the Provisional Practice of Happy Endings."

[9]For examples of fan discussions of the episode, see Trickster and Sara.

[10] The actor who plays Dean, Jensen Ackles, has a history of rebuffing and even disallowing fan questions regarding Destiel. On several occasions, his responses have been viewed as homophobic and hurtful. So much has been written about these incidents that Joseph Brennan published a scholarly article entitled "Jensen Ackles is a (Homophobic) Douchebag: The 'Politics of Slash' in Debates on a TV star's Homophobia."

[11] Simmons speaking of Mack in "A Hen in the Wolf House" (2:5, 00:10:31-34).

[12] As commentators (including Johnson) have noted, within the *Supernatural* world, bisexuality is not a possibility: evidence of an attraction to a female is assumed to counteract any indications of attraction to a male and renders a male character straight.

[13] Considerable scholarship on the problematic representations of race in Whedon's work exists. See, for example, the collected essays in Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, *Joss Whedon and Race: Critical Essays*. Likewise, Fitz plays an important role as a positive representation of a person with an invisible disability. That he might also be bisexual offers a very unusual and potentially powerful glimpse of possible intersectional representation.

[14] The reading of Fitz as bisexual with little acknowledgement of Mack's sexuality extends to fan portrayals of the ship. Many fan fiction and other fanon representations of Fitz and Mack rely on the narrative trope of Mack as the caregiver. Because Fitz struggles with the effects of his traumatic brain injury, and because Mack is particularly understanding of this struggle, this is perhaps not surprising. Even so, the portrayal is reflective of a long history of representations of characters of color providing unreciprocated emotional labor to traumatised white characters. See, for example, Sau-Ling C. Wong's "Diverted Mothering: Representations of Caregivers of Color in the Age of Multiculturalism."

[15] We have limited our consideration to Whedon's television series. This necessarily limits recognition of the more significant bisexual storylines and coding in the Buffyverse comics, but allows us to focus more narrowly on a specific form of representation in a single medium with an audience that does not necessarily follow storylines into alternative media.

[16] For example, in the *Angel* episode "The Girl in Question" (5.20, 00:13-06-31), Darla and Drusilla are shown in a flashback discussing a shared sexual encounter.

[17] Apparently Jane Espenson confirmed at Writercon 2004 that she believed Giles and Ethan had a sexual relationship back in the day ("Writercon").

[18] *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s more recent seasons do offer slightly more queer representation as well as representations of people of color—particularly Joey Gutierrez, an openly gay Latino character. While Joey has only been in six episodes since his introduction in season 3, and his character is certainly not a model of queer representation, he is notable as the first openly queer recurring character on *S.H.I.E.L.D.*

[19] Victoria Hand was introduced in *Dark Avengers* #11 (2010), in which she was dating fellow agent Isabelle.