"I certainly wouldn't want to be portrayed as a boring straight person": *Torchwood*, meaning-making and the performance of gender and sexual identities

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Abstract:
This essay presents work from audience research using focus groups exploring the representation of fluid sexuality in the BBC TV series *Torchwood* (2006-). I build on work in audience studies which has started to consider the realm of identity-(re)making through the text. I argue that by taking a self-reflexive approach together with performance theory we can better understand the space between meaning-making, identity and performance. Moreover I suggest that this highlights how media texts are used, even if in a limited way, in a process of self-reflection - partly reinforcing the view in media and cultural studies that identity is a 'process'. However, my participants also reveal a history of encounters with past discourses of homophobia which are part of current identity choices, and I argue that this challenges reductive notions of identity as in 'flux'.

Key words: Sexuality, television, *Torchwood*, audience, focus groups, identity, performance, queer and gender.

Introduction

Butler's notion of performance is well established in gender studies as a key approach in understanding how our sexual and gender identities often coalesce around binaries, for example particular forms of masculinity for men. For Butler (1990), gender is a set of repeat often unknowingly learnt performances, and through constant repetition the instability of those performances is hidden. In that way, she argues, queer or fluid sexualities, with their challenge to traditional hegemonic ideas of what a man or women should be, disrupt these gender performances and reveal them to be the just that. Whilst the notion of performance has been much discussed theoretically, there is less work applying the concept to audience research (Huffer, 2007 being an exception). In this essay, I apply the notion of performance to the analysis of participants' contributions from my research using focus group methodology. The research broadly examined the representation of sexuality in the BBC TV

series *Torchwood,* a spin-off from the recently revitalised *Dr Who* (1964-), which follows a team of alien hunters based in Cardiff. The series stood out at the time of its launch, by including a full cast of bisexual characters but rarely using sexual identity labels in the narrative, leaving the sexual representation of the characters relatively fluid. It has generated considerable interest from academics from a number of perspectives, leading to an edited volume about the series (Ireland, 2010). Academics have also welcomed the series taken for its taken-for-granted approach to sexuality (Medhurst, 2009) while others have critiqued its representation of male bisexuality versus that of female bisexuality (Chinn, 2012).

Here, I focus on three case studies from the research groups, paying close attention to their performance of masculinity and sexual identity in the research sessions. While I have focused on the representations in the text more closely in other examinations of the data, here, I try to consider very specifically the way textual interpretations of alternative sexuality in *Torchwood* can be seen as part of identity performance and possible (re)formation. My aim is to open up and add to the debate around performance and identity (re)formation through television texts. Audience work focusing on Film, TV and literature (Radway, 1984; Austin, 1999; Thomas, 2002; Huffer, 2007) has started to ask how we might see elements of identity that are performed or revealed through texts. It could be said that some audience studies scholars have moved the search for an understanding of media textual interpretation and its role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies into the realm of identity (re)making. For example, Huffer (2007) highlights, through a female case study, the way gender can be (re)formed in subtle but complex ways through her interest in Sylvester Stallone as a sensitive man, rather than for the hyper-masculine traits of a powerful body and action orientation he is often associated with. In this way, challenging monolithic ideas of what female desire for masculinity consists of in a heterosexual context. More widely, in media and cultural studies, there has been an increased interest in the concept of identity and debates around its fluidity. For example, in the recent undergraduate text *Media, Gender and Identity*, Gauntlett argues that 'nothing within your identity is fixed' and that identity is 'little more than a pile of (social and cultural) things which you have previously expressed, or which have been said about you' (2008: 134). Gauntlett suggests that increasingly there is a 'knowing construction of identity' (2008: 279). In this way, he echoes Butler's ideas around the potential of performance or a knowing construction of identity as political that can be a conscious enactment of subversive gender or sexual identities, which disrupts the status quo and reveals gender to be a fallacy.

In this essay, I explore Butler's (1990) ideas around performance and performativity together with theories of self-reflection (Bailey, 2005). In doing so, I note the limitations of the term performance, and the way that theories of self-reflection can help us better articulate differences between gender that might be performed, and in that sense purposeful, versus more performative versions of gender which support the status quo of masculinity and heteronormativity. Through this mode of analysis, I note the potential for identity fluidity and possibilities for texts to help foster identity (re)formation that Gauntlett

(2008) highlights. However, I argue that the notion of identity as only 'a pile of social/cultural things' (Gauntlett, 2008; 134) focuses on the potential to change identity now, but in terms of my participants, the degree of change possible also relates to the history of that identity making.

Method

In 2010 I conducted five focus groups, three in Brighton, and two in London. Each group consisted of between 4 and 7 group participants made of women and men.   Whilst I wanted to broaden my search for participants outside urban cosmopolitan areas, I was limited by financial restrictions. I recruited my participants through online advertisements and through social network snowballing. There were members of the groups who were from poorer backgrounds or localities within the two areas. However, most of the participants conveyed liberal attitudes to sexuality, considered themselves to be 'middle class' (four out of 23 respondents) and were either professionals in education, marketing or students. In many ways, this meant that I was restricted in considering how participants from more diverse backgrounds might interpret the episode, and indeed how that might be part of their identity (re) formation. However, for the purposes of my interest in the possibilities of identity change, this group is particularly relevant as their access to education and cultural capital should allow them the potential to inhabit more fluid identities. They therefore providing an interesting case, in terms of the extent which they perceive identity as fluid, as well as the ways they (re)form and perform identity in the groups.

To address the ethics of discussing matters of sexuality, and participant's sexual identity, during the recruitment phase of the research I highlighted that the study addressed issues of sexuality and identity, to ensure from the outset participants were aware of the focus of the research. In addition, all focus group members' names have been anonymised in agreement with their wishes.   I screened an episode of *Torchwood* entitled *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* – the first episode of the second season.   This was selected for its concentration of storylines around fluid sexuality. The episode focuses on the arrival of Captain John Hart, a past acquaintance of the leader of the *Torchwood* team Captain Jack Harkness. We discover John is Jack's ex-colleague from the Time Agency and also an ex-lover. In the episode both lead men make it clear that they are attracted to both sexes.

After screening the episode I conducted a discussion with participants for 45 minutes. In the session, I asked participants to talk about what stood out in the text, as well as their perceptions of sexual and gender representation in the episode. Finally, I asked them for their thoughts on their own ideas of gender and sexual identity after seeing the text. I analysed the transcripts of the groups using a broad discourse analysis methodology. For this essay I have revisited my transcripts, but with a focus on the performance of gender and sexual identity within the groups, and how this related to the discourses used (and not used) by my participants. I have developed three case studies which reveal different aspects of performance on a spectrum, in terms of the extent to which they are challenging

dominant discourses of heteronormativity and masculinity. Through the first case, Ben, I focus on how performances of gender can challenge traditional ideas of heterosexual masculinity and highlight how we can use performance theory to differentiate between political performance and more performative notions of gender which reinforce dominant and potentially oppressive forms of gender. In the second case, Rich, I further highlight how performative gay male identity can be potentially oppressive and link to discourses of heteronormativity but can also offer solidarity, revealing how multifarious the notion of gendered sexual performance can be. In the final case, Robert, I discuss his reproduction of discourses that could be seen as homophobic, but highlight the way his history of identity making limits the potential for him to challenge hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity.

Case 1 - Queer discourses, 'hetero' identity

Ben, a 35 year old Travel Marketeer from group two in Brighton, stood out in my focus groups in the way he seemed to reject notions of traditional heterosexual identity despite being a self-identified 'straight' man.   It could be argued that Ben might be performing liberal gender and sexual discourses consciously, in relation to the presence of two women and three gay men in the research session he attended, and in relation to the local socio-cultural geography of Brighton as a liberal self-proclaimed gay capital (Bakshi and Browne, 2011).   However, from the beginning of the session, before the group dynamics began to form, Ben marked out that he would take a liberal stance on sexuality:

> Researcher: 'Can I ask why people decided to come along this evening?'
> Ben: 'I thought it (*the focus group research*) sounded interesting and fun so wanted to be involved'.
> Researcher: 'What I am interested in, then, is what people have heard about the show – obviously there is a lot of media around the show before it started, you might have heard through friends and so on. Had anyone heard anything particular about the show beforehand'?
> Ben: 'Just the intrigue around the sexuality of the show just the idea of not knowing which way the lead character would go, straight or bisexual, quite an interesting character and fun concept for lead character'.

At this stage Ben had not revealed his heterosexuality but through these opening comments he was making it clear he did believe in liberal notions of alternative sexual identities. Ben's contributions to the group continued to sustain a liberal approach to sexuality and gender throughout the session, seen through his comments at different moments:

> Ben: 'it was interesting to see bisexuality displayed from a different way to the norm [but] – there was nothing developed in enough depth to make me think about sexuality properly'.
>
> Ben: 'I think it was very different between the two alien characters and the two human characters; because the humans were very passive, not macho, and the two alien guys were very macho full of bravado, very cold and calculating really'.

Here, we see that Ben in the first quote foregrounds what he interprets as the text's ability to move through the sexual spectrum, but pays attention to its lack of depth. In doing so, he demonstrates that he is at ease talking about issues of sexuality. In the second excerpt, he positions himself as critical of the idea of 'machismo'. Ben connects the notion of machismo with bravado and then suggests it is 'cold and calculating', revealing that he disapproves of this potential aspect of masculinity. Thinking about Ben's articulation and performance of gender in relation to wider discourses of gender and sexuality, we can say that Ben is resisting some pressures of traditional hegemonic masculinity. At the level of the conversation he defends against these discourses by often bringing the group talk back to a focus on the importance of fluid representations of sexuality but also by questioning the representation of masculinity in the text. In this way, he is performing a version of masculinity and sexuality in the group which some men would not feel comfortable with; a revelation of emotional insight, and an ability to question heterosexuality and its dominance as an ideology, despite defining himself as a heterosexual man.

Ben's foregrounding of an identity which challenged many of the usual notions of 'white straight men' continued throughout the focus group. At one point when asked whether the text defined sexuality, Ben led the discussion and seemed to place value on the fluidity of sexuality in the text:

> Ben: 'I think it really did ebb and flow through from heterosexuality to homosexual and back, it was interwoven all the way through I thought'.

We can say here that Ben, as a man, is at least not protecting hegemonic forms of masculinity and sexuality, which help to reproduce and maintain men's position economically and institutionally. In the wider sense this adds validity to arguments about the possibilities of liberal texts in terms of agency and political change (Hallam and Marshment, 1995); that liberatory discourses (and liberal media texts) can open up spaces to express and perform what might be seen as subversive elements of gender and sexuality in this case in relation to dominant masculine hegemony. Furthermore even if we interpret Ben's assertions as subject to the local queer liberal discourse, we can say that while heterosexuality can be seen to define homosexuality as the 'other', in this case heterosexuality can be seen to be defined by its others. In other words, Ben's notion of a heterosexual identity seems to be positioned within a wider sexual spectrum rather than as

the default sexuality by which others are differentiated.   Ben's challenge to heteronormative discourses can be seen again in his closing comments in the research session which I now want to explore, but I want to think about these comments in a different mode of analysis; in relation to an awareness of gendered sexuality as a performance, rather than in relation to the qualities of that performance.

Gender awareness

Towards the end of the research session Ben makes a final bid to deconstruct heterosexuality and also the discourse of sexual labelling:

> Ben: '... I certainly wouldn't want to be portrayed as a boring straight person, they're the boring people - it's not particularly nice to be labelled as having no curiosity or depth or interest about yourself - so it's nice to be fluid and not labelled'.

Ben vehemently rejects the label of 'straightness' here (and the wider idea of sexual labels). In other words, while he might lead a 'straight' sex life he doesn't want to be 'seen' as straight. In this way, Ben acknowledges that sexual identity is something other people will measure and you can be 'portrayed' by that. This suggests two things: firstly, it foregrounds that there can be an awareness of the performance of gendered sexuality and how it is perceived by others, but also that the notion of sexual and gender identity as performance operates outside academic boundaries. By this I mean that Ben might not be conscious of this as an academic idea, but he is reproducing the idea of our sexuality being read as a performance. Austin, in his work on *Basic Instinct* (1999), noted a similar consciousness of wanting to be 'seen' to have watched a film due to its explicit reputation; in that sense to make film viewing part of a performance of sexual identity, albeit a young heterosexual adult one. As Austin notes, 'the consumption of sexualised images of women not only produces private pleasures, but is also part of an attempted public articulation of an 'adult' heterosexual male identity'(1999: 154). Although Austin's respondent was less conscious that he was performing a particular version of sexuality, Ben in a similar way to Austin's respondent wants to be associated with the text in order to be 'seen' in a particular way. He does not want to be 'seen' as a 'boring straight person'.

This in part speaks to a debate that has emerged since the publication of Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* about the nature of her use of the term performance.   In her book she highlights the way we are caught in performances of gender that are separate from the biology of the sexed body. Butler acknowledges in a later interview that her example of drag as part of gender performance became a 'paradigm for performativity' (Butler in Osborne, 1996), perhaps misleading people about her intended meaning around performance. In the same interview, Butler then differentiates between performance and performativity, suggesting that the latter should be seen 'through the more limited notion

of resignification' (111). By that she seems to be suggesting that some gender performances are in some ways taken from a set of what I would call 'performative figures' of gender and then re-performed, rather than as performances moulded solely by the subject. She seems to be highlighting that it is the public nature, the display of gender that we are re-performing, for the access it gives us to the 'heterosexual matrix', and less the theatrical performance which some have interpreted with its connotations of agency. She goes on to say that 'what's interesting is that this kind of voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere' (111).

To return to Ben, then, we can say that his performance here is, if only in a small way, part of the wider desire Butler talks about, for a remaking of sexual and gender identity. It suggests a level of consciousness to the performance of gendered sexuality which is operating somewhere between the overtly political (performance) and everyday (re)production of sexuality (performative) and highlights the slipperiness around the idea of performance. In this way, arguably, there is a need for a more precise way to think about this space between 'performance' and the 'performative'. Indeed Butler herself turned to another philosopher to help her better articulate the relationship between performance and performativity. She suggests that the philosopher George Herbert Mead's work on phenomenology can help us further understand the mundane way in which 'social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign' (187). There is symmetry here between the ideas of performance vs. performativity and debates in media studies about textual interpretation in terms of agency vs. reproduction of dominant ideas. The same issues of identification of what is a voluntary performance or 'use' of media, versus that which is a less conscious reproduction of dominant messages in the media, have been discussed in the often dichotomised active/passive audience debate which has dominated media studies for so long. Bailey (2005) also uses Mead's work on the ''I/Me' hermeneutic approach' to help him navigate how we can see media consumption/identity (re)formation as a process of reflection; to think about the space between the consumption of messages and their use. Or, to think in Butlerian terms, the process which might mean the difference between the reproduction of 'performative' gendered sexual identity or a more purposeful 'performance'. He uses a definition of Mead's approach to highlight what he means:

> For Mead, there are two sides to the social self. There is the objective presence of the self within the group which acts as a stimulus to others; and there is the subjective attitude of reflection which treats as an object the responses of the body to others in interaction. Mead had labelled these two faces of the self, which are continually in dialogue, the me and the I. Both faces are social and only emerge together in discourse, but the 'me' represents a unique identity, a self develops through seeing its form in the attitudes others take towards it,

> while the 'I' is the subjective attitude of reflection itself, which gazes on both the objective image of the self and its own responses. (38)

Ben's contribution highlights how Bailey's approach can be further applied to audience research, and can help us think about the process of interpretation and reformation of identity. Ben's quote above foregrounds that there can be a self-reflexive aspect to the way we position our identities; we are aware of the 'me' that is seen, and the 'I' reflects on that and perhaps adjusts its 'me' position in relation to it. In Ben's case on the whole this awareness of gendered sexual performance could be said to be an integral part of the way he challenges wider ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity. Whatever his motives, he seems to recognise both the qualities of discourses of dominant hegemonic masculinity which should be challenged, but also that they are performances and that he can, as Butler proposes, make his performances political. In this way, then, we can see a link between the liberal opportunities afforded by a TV text, its interpretation as such, and then for Ben the opportunity to reflect upon it, and to break a cycle of performativity that exists around dominant forms of male heterosexual masculinity.

I have argued, so far then, that despite the often powerful forces of discourses of masculinity and heteronormativity, texts and their interpretations can be seen to offer opportunities for alternative gendered sexual performances. By bringing together Butler's ideas of performance and Mead/Bailey's models of self-reflexivity we can open up a space for thinking about the relationships between 'performance', a self-awareness of gendered sexual identities, and the 'performative' which can be seen as those 'figures' of gender that we often replicate and may reproduce oppressive forms of gender hierarchy. It highlights that even if we are cautious about the potential of agency here ,there is an aspect of meaning-making, where one reflects on how we are 'seen' (in the context of what a text has suggested; so, in terms of *Torchwood* that one can be fluid in relation to sexual orientation) and adjusts or reaffirms identity on that basis. In this case, I have explored the ways in which gendered sexual identity can be seen to be 'performed' through opportunities in a text, showing resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality. However, to think in Butlerian terms, I want to shift focus now from Ben's 'performances' of sexual gendered identity to what she has characterised as the more 'performative' versions of gendered sexual identity. By that I mean where we can see the performative figures of gender which we replicate to be part of the 'heterosexual matrix'.

Case 2 - 'Reading the romance' … in Torchwood?

Rich is a self-identified gay man from focus group two in Brighton, and offered distinctly different readings of *Torchwood* to the rest of his fellow participants. When asked about the representation of sexuality, Rich often steered the conversation towards its portrayal of relationships, noting where there were romantic moments in the text:

> Rich: 'There was a tender point, when he asked that guy out on a date, that was quite sweet, so in terms of asking people out on a date I related to that – no one would ask me out on a date and well I wouldn't ask anyone out on a date – well that did go through my mind' *(everyone laughs and Shane pats Rich on shoulder)*.

Here, Rich reveals relatively early on that he enjoyed the love-orientated element of the episode, and related that to his own experience and identity, partly being self-effacing which had the desired effect, generating group laughter.   In this way, Rich used the text to reiterate his own identity as a man who believes in romance. By relating to the romantic plot in the series, and then to his own identity, he also perpetuates discourses of romance; that there is an idealised man out there and it would seem Rich is waiting for him. These discourses are often reproduced through Western media, film and television.   As Illouz (2006) notes in her consideration of the development of discourses of love and romance:

> If during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the novel which offered to the self a narrative of love(especially to its female readers) in the twentieth century that role has been assumed (and even amplified) by the movie.' (39)

Indeed, alongside it, but always intertwined, the media, consumer culture and the profit motive have also perpetuated the discourse of romance/love as Illouz notes: 'Consumer culture has used extensively the image of the couple in love to promote its goods (a man and a woman engaged either explicitly or implicitly in a romantic interaction is probably the most widespread image in advertising culture)' (39).   The notion of romance and love as an aspiration for many of us has become a taken for granted media and consumer commodity. Moreover, the mechanics of romance and love are bound up in heterosexual institutions, including in many parts of the world Christianity and the notion of marriage; in that way the discourse of romance and love is one that is inextricably linked with heteronormativity. In the above excerpt Rich positions himself as at the mercy of this discourse semantically, by prioritising the idea of being asked out on a date, then by setting himself into that scene and suggesting that no one would ask him and vice versa. It foregrounds the way our interpretations of meanings in texts are governed by powerful and pervasive heteronormative discourses such as that of romance/love. However, it is not just heteronormative discourses which are evident in a reading of Rich's textual interpretations:

> Rich: 'I was wondering about the quality of deepness around the relationships other than a straight one. One of them said something about how wonderful the relationship was then he said it only lasted about two weeks but they were stuck in a time loop or something and I thought well some gay relationships are

like that (*laughter in group*)the relationship has felt like forever... there was no kind of obvious heterosexual couple going on'.

Duggan (2002) posits that as well as pressures of heteronormativity upon queer women and men there are now, following the establishment of a more predominant Western urban queer sub-culture, the pressures of homonormativity to deal with. This has also been referred to as 'queer liberalism' and is characterised by tropes such as the normalisation of aspects of the homosexual lifestyle and the reification of romantic love (and its institutions such as 'civil partnership' as a version of heterosexual marriage). In that way, it is the transposition of heteronormative ideas of love into what have become pressures of homonormativity. I would suggest Rich reveals the influence of this discourse in his reading of the relationships in *Torchwood*. He perpetuates the performance of a 'gay' sexual identity which is subject to the power of homonormativity. This places gay men on the once heteronormative, and fast becoming homonormative, hierarchy that suggests the best type of relationship is a long-lasting emotional one. Furthermore, the corollary of this is the perception that somehow this is less achievable for a gay man and that inevitably emotionality for a gay man in a relationship is painful and destined to failure: a cycle that is literally like being 'stuck in a time loop'. In this way, Rich is caught between the pressures of these two discourses: the heteronormative, which reifies the long term emotional relationship; and the homonormative which fuels this idea in gay culture, but simultaneously suggests that it is not achievable due to the 'nature' of gay men.

Rich's interpretations' underline Litosseliti and Sunderland's assertion (2002) that identity-making is a two way process; we bring our own elements of identity but these have been, and are governed, by wider societal discourses. In this way, it also highlights the polysemic nature of the text; if one is influenced by discourses of homonormativity as seems to be the case for Rich, very different meanings can be taken from texts to that which we saw from the previous close reading of Ben's interpretations, where I argued he took opportunities from the text to 'perform' against wider societal heteronormativity.

This is not to reduce Rich's interpretations to 'passive' readings of the text. There is evidence of the 'I/me' reflective process in action through Rich's comments. Rich highlights that he has reflected on the text, he has considered it in relation to himself – to the 'I'. But he also repositions that as part of the 'me', in the way he is seen, by reforming the comment into self-deprecation. He taps into the repertoire of gay sub-culture; the sub-cultural humour used historically to make light of the 'queer' situation; in this case the predicament of the gay man on the path to finding a long term relationship. He wants to be seen as another one of the many gay men in that situation. In that way, while perhaps being subject to the power of hetero/homonormative discourses, he is using performativity to draw on the camaraderie of the gay sub culture to help 'support' him, and in that sense could be seen as a positive element of gendered sexual 'performativity'. Moreover, it reminds us that the dynamics of the focus group offer a different perspective on gendered sexuality

that would not be available to us through a one-to-one interview for example. We can see how Rich performs a version of sexual gendered identity to reach out to others in the group.

So far, then, I have argued that identity-making can be seen to influence interpretations of texts, and that texts seem to be utilised to reaffirm identities, both challenging and reproducing dominant gender and sexual discourses. The subsequent identity (re)formation can also arguably be seen through the I/Me paradigm. Both cases highlighted that whether or not we challenge, resist, negotiate or succumb to the power of current discourses of sex and gender, identity can be seen as a process, if only in terms of our abilities to reflect on our own identity-making. Rich's case, however, highlights the way that despite the self-reflection on identity that he displays, his conformity to homonormative ideals means that these aspects of his sexual identity are performative and therefore at this point are less fluid. The next participant I want to discuss, Robert, is worth considering in some detail, not least because he reveals how past identity (re)formations can influence the current reproduction of particular gendered sexual performativity, and points to a questioning of some of the more excitable analyses of identity as a process in 'flux'.

Case 3 - He's here, and he's not queer

All my focus groups took place in the relatively liberal backdrops of Brighton and London. Most of the groups were either mindful of, or actively promoting, what I am calling 'queer liberal discourse'. Indeed, one reason why Robert, a 56 year old man, stood out was that he initially seemed unaware or unwilling to take part in the 'queer liberal' discourse which pervaded most of my groups. It was, however, a small group (four participants) which meant that he and his fellow respondents were able to express themselves perhaps more fully, than in the well-subscribed focus groups. A corollary of this, is, that Robert was able to speak substantially without being 'talked out' by others in the meeting. Robert marked out his attitudes, and therefore by implication his sexuality, early on in the proceedings of the group:

> Researcher: 'So in terms of your reactions to the representations in the show that you saw tonight what was your initial reaction – Robert, what was your reaction?'
> Robert: 'I can't say I was very comfortable, I accept that people are gay and some are not and that there are a wide range of sexualities but I don't particularly like watching homosexual acts'.
> Rose: *looks down.*
> Researcher: 'OK'.
> Chris: *raises eyebrow.*

Here, then, Robert attempts to situate a particular type of acceptance of queer lifestyle by differentiating between 'accepting' it, and having to experience it. By highlighting that he

'tolerated' homosexual acts he was making a statement very early on about his sexuality; it very definitely wasn't 'homosexual'. This impacted on group dynamics very early on in the session. Robert in some ways was positioned as an 'outsider' by his fellow participants who all demonstrated themselves to be in favour of queer liberal discourse. Their reaction can be seen in the above excerpt through non-verbal communication such as looking down. Through this dynamic, I found myself as a researcher mediating between the group members. While as a politically-motivated queer academic this revelation was difficult for me to hear, I found myself taking a more neutral position of trying to navigate a path where I didn't suggest acceptance of Robert's views, but that I was nevertheless interested in them. This dynamic echoed Thomas's (2002) experiences in her focus group on *Inspector Morse* (1987-2000) where one of her (male) participants becomes isolated in the group, by being dogmatic and unwilling to hear the views of (female) others. Although, Thomas positioned herself more 'on the side' of the women in that case. It is possible that some of Robert's early isolation acted to reinforce his views, in the sense that he felt he needed to 'defend' his position but, as will become clear, it is probably other factors in Robert's life and approach to gendered sexual identity and history, which contributed to his early demarcation of his sexuality. Sexuality is closely, if not inextricably linked to gender and in many ways is governed by it. As the discussion develops, Robert also starts to reveal his conceptions of gender and masculinity through his own contributions, and I want to consider these now and how they might be part of shaping his views on homosexuality.

Dividing women and men, defending masculinity

Once the group moves into a phase of discussion regarding the portrayal of women in the series, Robert prioritises the illusion of gender differences in the sexes:

> Robert: 'One of the powerful images was the woman throwing the punch, that was a male punch if I may put it that way, the image for me is male, and that's a theme which I would say has been more and more developed in cinema and film and TV'.
> Chris: 'Or was she performing masculinity'.
> Robert: 'Sorry?'
> Chris: 'Or was she performing masculinity'.
> Robert : 'Err I think that's what I was saying wasn't I?'
> Chris: *Puts his hands up to suggest uncertainty.*
> Robert: 'The way they are both at some level idealistically feminised but also very masculine. I find that very uncomfortable. It seems to me representing women in that way, it is politically motivated in some kind of way, and I think it is feminist in a way and it doesn't tie up with my experience of what women are like, obviously there are a huge wide range of women as there are men. I am rambling really as I find it hard to express it'.

In this exchange we can see that Robert associates the punch of a woman with masculinity, and in that sense immediately conflates actions that could be said to be about gender (masculine violence) with the male body. He essentialises the activity. Chris challenges him, trying to reframe the conversation into one about the attributes of gender, but Robert at this point still deflects this statement and asserts that he was correct in the first place. Robert then brings the debate into a political sphere, by highlighting that to make women more 'masculine' as well as 'feminine' is a political endeavour. He is both 'othering' women and (re)performing the ideology of sex difference through the dichotomy of gender. I would suggest that here, Robert is defending that which he sees should be the territory of men. These strategies can be seen in a wider sense as a small part of the hegemonic dominance of heterosexual masculinity which men buy into, and maintain. Robert defends men's position as superior to women by questioning the relevance of feminism or of trying to represent women in a way that challenges his experience of them. In this way, then, Robert defends 'straight' male masculinity where straight men are at the top of the hegemonic ladder followed by gay men and women, perpetuating discourses of homophobia and masculine dominance. Moreover, Robert thus far in the focus group could be seen to be performing gender in a way that defends his conceptions of masculinity. Towards the end of the session, however, Robert reveals more of his past that sheds light on his performance of gender and sexuality.

Histories of identity-making

When asked about whether Robert saw his sexual identity as political, Robert revealed some of the background, which, may have contributed to the way he had formed his identity in terms of masculinity and sexuality:

> Robert: 'Whether my identity as a heterosexual is political I am not sure. But, of course heterosexuals are a group, and that group has power and heterosexuals are a majority. I would have thought it has more power than other groups, in that sense it is political, but in the sense it is the subject that is political, rather than the individuals in it. I am aware at this stage of my life that I could have chosen to gone down the route of homosexuality; I was at a boarding school where homosexuality was rife, and I took part myself sometimes in homosexual acts and I can see the attraction as a choice to go down that road. However, I don't think I am constitutionally able, and I have a son who has a kind of dilemma around that, but it's too complicated to explain the whole thing.   Ermm, the position which society takes on these matters has political consequences or social consequences one should say. It will have an effect on what choices people make in their lives. In that sense it is political or socio-political, it's difficult in a sense everything is political'.

Here Robert reveals some of the 'material' as well as discursive pressures that arguably have influenced his choices around sexuality. Perhaps most importantly, Robert uses the formal language of being 'constitutionally' able to frame his reasons for not pursuing his gay desires. This seems to match his earlier use of the word homosexuality (a term which he again invokes here) as a formal almost clinical method of referring to his ability to cope with the process of coming out. In this way, Robert seems to be separating the rational (connoted by the formal medical/legal language) 'choices' of sexual lifestyle from the (emotional/physical) bodily desires of sexuality, a choice arguably faced by many more men of Robert's age in the UK, who were developing a sexual identity in the 1970s. It is a reminder that being gay when Robert was younger was much more taboo, and therefore despite his desires he chose not to pursue a gay lifestyle. Through the *Torchwood* text and group talk we can say that at the very least Robert revealed and contextualised some of his history, which up until that point appeared to be a reaffirmation of the dominant discourses of heteronormative masculine hegemony.

In doing so Robert's contributions also throws into sharp focus the reality of our identities; that they are at least partly made up of, or reformed from, experiences and previous vestiges of past identities. This perspective challenges to a certain extent the reduction of identity making to a process or one with possibilities. To return to Gauntlett's position on identity in his text book *Media, Gender and Identity* (2008), he includes a bullet point list summarising the queer theory position on sexual and gendered identity stating that its view of identity is that 'people can change' (134). While Gauntlett here does not suggest that people will change, by summarising identity theory down to this point arguably we lose some of the complications involved in this process. In relation to Rich, to some extent, and to Robert, we are reminded that key decisions evidently influenced by what would have been more powerful discourses of homophobia in the 70s, create foundations for identity building later in life. Robert's revelation also highlighted, that through the group he has considered the circumstances of his identity making, and therefore at least is showing a possible change in his identity. In that way, if we want to be more precise than saying 'people can change', we could say that for Robert identity is a process with possibilities but one that is bound up in the history of the process of that identity making.

Conclusion

In this essay I wanted to address the links between meaning-making, textual interpretation and its relation to performances of gendered sexual identity. I brought together recent gender theory (Butler, 1990), perspectives on meaning-making in terms of self-reflection (Bailey, 2005) and identity theory, to focus on a part of the interpretation process where textual meaning-making is used in identity (re)formation. Ben's case highlighted his conscious performance of a gendered sexual identity that he seems to be aware is 'seen'. In that way it is perhaps foregrounding Butler's vision for what can be defined in a small way as a subversive 'performance' of gender against the grain of 'performative' dominant discourses of masculine hegemony. This could be contrasted with Rich's performative

nature which reiterated hetero/homonormativity through discourses of romance and in that way sustained Butler's heterosexual matrix. However, Rich also used humour and camaraderie in the group to reach out for support from the other queer male members of the group and in that sense while performative this version of sexual gendered identity is still useful to Rich. It highlights the complex nature of the terms of performance, and performativity, in terms of their utilisation in the politics of gendered sexual identity and that there is still room to think more carefully about the space between these two ideas.

In terms of meaning-making, I have suggested that there is symmetry in the debates surrounding performance and performativity with those surrounding agency and determination. I noted that both Bailey, and Butler, turned to the philosopher Mead to help them with some of the difficulties of thinking through the space between consumption of messages and acting upon them. By following Mead's approach, I was able to show how my participants all in the end reflected on the 'I', through the way their 'me' was seen, either in the group as in Robert's case towards the end of the session, or in terms of the way they relayed their idea of their public 'me', as was the case for Ben in terms of his desire to not be 'seen' as the 'straight' one. I would argue that this approach reveals the complicated nature of media consumption and its relations with identity-making. In this way, we are perhaps not being sophisticated enough in our approach to the how, and why, of identity which, in a political sense, is also to a certain extent the how and why of gendered and sexual agency.

Recent texts on gender and identity (Gauntlett, 2008) have stressed the possibilities of change and fluidity in identity over the constraints. I have argued that while my participants have shown how they both reaffirm and reform their identities, they have also revealed how these are contextualised within older parts of their experience and identity. In particular with Robert due to his slightly 'uncomfortable' presence in the group and his group's smaller size, I have been able to analyse at length the way he performed his gendered sexual identity. He resisted the predominant queer liberal discourse in the group, and at a wider level he supported discourses of heteronormative masculinity. However, as became clear through later contributions, much of Robert's sexual gendered identity seems to have been constructed through experiences at school. He made choices which he felt were related to expected 'outcomes'. At school he envisaged the choice to be openly gay or bisexual, as one which could affect his future negatively. In this way, then, at the same time as adding to the argument that identity is a continual process, I want to suggest that all the cases considered so far, also problematise the notion that identity is easily in flux.

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